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Seeing, Saying, Knowing, Naming: Oppositional African-American Women's Poetics

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SEEING, SAYING, KNOWING, NAMING:

OPPOSITIONAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S POETICS

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ABSTRACT

Title: Seeing, Saying, Knowing, Naming: Oppositional African-American Women's Poetics

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U.S. black women live at the intersection of racism and sexism, with heterosexism and class bias further complicating their experience of multiple oppressions. These oppressions also create a consciousness, forged in the feminist and Black Arts movements, of a selfhood denied during enslavement and subsequently misrepresented by racial mythology. This study concerns how Sonia Sanchez and Lucille Clifton's poems counter such denials of black women's selfhood.

Chapter One contextualizes Sanchez and Clifton as activist poets who uphold the Black Arts Movement aim of self-determination. Using black feminist and Black cultural studies theory, I claim that Sanchez and Clifton, in Chapters Two and Three respectively, validate black women's complex identities. Sampling poems across a broad time period, I examine subject matter, orality, and form in citing Sanchez and Clifton as situated knowers whose naming of black women's bodies, voices, and emotions writes a missing herstory. Chapter Four extends this claim, acknowledging Elizabeth Alexander, Nikki Finney and Patricia Smith as younger poets who contribute their own dimensions to black women's herstory. The political and social liberation their naming enacts renames black women as self-possessed subjects.

My dissertation locates agency in Clifton, Sanchez, Alexander, Finney and Smith on several levels. By unveiling these herstories, they dismantle ongoing misrepresentation of black women as objects, supplanting those with images, voices, and forms that express black female interiority. They align the counternarrative nature of

herstory with black female subjectivity and embed those herstories in poetic forms. Thus, they connect the politics of black women's creative and corporeal lives.

Sanchez and Clifton also demonstrate a tradition of cultural praxis by women poets linked to the Black Arts Movement (BAM); Alexander, Finney, and Smith prove that its precedent of self- determination continues to inform socially-conscious poets. Together, their poetry affirms the larger impact of the BAM as a catalyst to black feminism and insists on a place within interdisciplinary scholarship.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

1969: CLIFTON, SANCHEZ, AND THE POLITICS OF NAMING BLACK WOMEN

> Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so that it can be thought.
> Audre Lorde[i]

We who are black women have often been named by others. The mantles of Jezebel, or Mammy, or Tragic Mulatto, spawned in the United States, have followed us across centuries and continents. Welfare Queen, Black-Evil-and-Ugly, or Bougie Bitch descend on our unwilling, if not unwitting, shoulders. Oreo and Dyke and High or Low Yellow come and go. Some of us have seen efforts to confine us to Sapphire. The names change as they come over time, often in multiples. We have known many namings. They persist and continue today. Superwoman and Video Vixen and Good Sister weigh in alongside Affirmative Action Hire and Threat to My Entitled Primacy. Do we survive this onslaught of nomenclature long enough to change it? Do we lose the ability to recognize and name our true selves if these names steadily reinforce their perception? What happens to the black women's voices silenced by economic circumstance, by psychologies of shame, and by socio-political design? Do they go unexpressed and even erased? Are we, after all, the women Abby Lincoln describes in 1969 as "just too damned much for everybody" (101)?

We who are black women have often recognized such naming for what it is: an act signifying power. Naming has often been one of many efforts by a capitalist, racist, heterosexist white patriarchy to dominate our bodies and minds. It extends to acts of classifying, stereotyping, and profiling. These acts confer names on groups that authorize and justify control measures; we have seen naming, at various historical moments, deployed to condone disenfranchisement, redlining, lynching, and forced sterilization. Such efforts, of course, have been levied against not only black women, but people of the African diaspora as a whole and

many other groups experiencing oppression of various types. In turn, we can be counted among those who buffet that oppression by turning the power of naming to our own ends.

This study focuses on the practice and meaning of black women's poetry as used in this way. I also situate this practice broadly within the Black Arts Movement (BAM) as a primary cultural context. I want to emphasize the BAM as *one of several* contexts that energize and inform the poets and cultural work I discuss without constraining them. In doing so, race is important to clarify. References to Blackness regard it as a social construction, not "inherent or fixed" and "correspond[ing] to no biological or genetic reality" (Delgado et al 7). My use of the terms "Black" and "American" are confined to those African-Americans originating in and/or exposed primarily to the United States. I have chosen to capitalize the term Black only in alignment with its reference to the concept of Blackness as a progressive, community-centered social model of African-American identity or as asserted by established critical discourses (the Black Arts Movement, black feminist thought and Black cultural studies). While class and sexuality are always already at work in a discussion of identity and concern me also as aspects of black women's intersectionality, these will be among the less-emphatic aspects of this discussion.

This work proceeds from a position that black women's lived experiences place them in complex relationship to issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality, so much so that their writing —poetry in this case– tends to implicate these issues. Carol Boyce Davies indicates this by observing that "Black women's writing re-negotiates the questions of identity; once Black women's experience is accounted for, assumptions about identity, community, and theory have to be reconsidered" (3). Boyce also suggests the very particular nature of these experiences and their broader meaning. Naked and breathing, yet severed from names and recognizable lives, black women were among those humans kidnapped and sold as objects on auction blocks for

over two hundred years. On this account alone, naming is particularly necessary personal and political work. This insistent past is overlaid with one of centuries-long, unprosecuted sexual assault, and the de facto suppression of justice for these crimes. Black women's culture still contains within its range of experiences an inheritance of tangled expression. It is a culture lined with suppressed voices, ingrained with those who have contested these conditions, and those who have navigated the spaces between, all struggling to name and define themselves. In short, Boyce indicates that black women's actions, reactions and participation as well as their invisibility, silence and complicity have meaning for everyone. The suppression of their subjectivity in discussions of literature (whether linked to an American or global culture) creates a lie and a void.

Boyce alludes to all of this and more; she also recognizes the need for a counter-discourse that naming, as performed by progressive black women poets, provides. In other words, when black women undertake self-definition by naming, the mere claim establishes a break with enslavement, objectification, and subjugation; the speaking and writing of this story then reinforces the break. Through their voices and writing, they connect abstractions like freedom and subjectivity more concretely to personal experience. Self-definition, Patricia Hill Collins writes, is a core theme of resistance which she cites in advancing a black feminist epistemology. Collins points to the examples of counter-narratives, written and enacted, by Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Fannie Barrier Williams and other foremothers who have opted to reject being "passive consumers of controlling images of [themselves], and have instead "crafted identities designed to empower them" (97-8). Through this study, I aim to be responsible to this legacy of self-definition. I am motivated by another aspect of self-definition such as Barbara Christian describes in her narrative of black women's scholarship–one that is responsible and responsive, also, to those outside of the academy ("But What" 64-66).

Certainly, black women's relationships to their own lives and images (as well as others) have been formally studied across the disciplines—as anthropology, sociology, economics and history, for example. In fact, this work is undergirded by that which emanates from the extensive research of Joyce Ladner, Darlene Clark Hine, Jean Fagan Yellin, Jacqueline Johnson, Paula Giddings, Debora Gray-White , Kali Gross, and many others. Such writers enable black women's cultural visibility and role in interdisciplinary discourse. They participate in a different sort of naming, aligned with and complementary to my own but which pursues other questions through other disciplinary formats.

The primary intent of this work is literary study, one that benefits greatly from the equivalent support for black women as subjects which other scholars provide. The word work of numerous scholars resonates through my concerns, more than can be cited here. I respond to Barbara Smith's rallying call to "examine black women's experience through studying our history, literature and culture", which a black feminist critical discourse would serve (qtd. in Mitchell 412). Barbara Christian's approach to literary study, which strives for discovery within "the language of creative writers" and "presuppose[s] a need, a desire among folk like me who also want to save their own lives" is also a beacon (qtd. in Mitchell 358). Numerous fiction writers, for whom Toni Morrison is the representative, bring this study's engagement with black women's subjectivity alive in prose. I also seek to complement work by Mari Evans, Houston Baker, Lorenzo Thomas, Aldon Nielsen, Mike Sell, Regina Jennings and other critics who write the formative contributions of black women poets into the cultural history of American poetry and the BAM particularly.

Aside from years of attention to the poetry of Sanchez and Clifton, three nonfiction works directly provoked this study: Mary Helen Washington's 1974 *Black World* essay, "Black Women Image Makers: Their Fiction Becomes Our Reality" and, among others from Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*–"Poetry is Not A Luxury" and "The Transformation of Silence into

Language and Action." It responds squarely to Washington's recognition of ties between black women's lives and the imagery black women authors provide; it takes up Lorde's assessment of poetry's multivalent expressive power with greatly feminist implications. This study also takes a position that these stances can be read in concert with ideas about imagery, identity, and literary art– ideas that begin speaking directly to women during the Black Arts Movement. I maintain that Larry Neal's reflection on the 1960s as a time when "Black people were shaping a new consciousness of themselves, both in the national and international sense" allows room for the designs on newness black women had in mind, even if his regard runs toward ambivalence, if not exclusively male subjects (129). In fact, Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" produces, for this study, a vital example of how black women artists interpret this "new consciousness". After illustrating the pain and mystery of suppressed black women's lives across generations, Walker calls upon them to realize and acknowledge those lives through their art (237, 238). The possibility I explore is that such a juncture of ideas as I have summarized need not be oppositional on the grounds of theoretical diversity.

Secondly, the matter of genre is not incidental. I also write out of a deep conviction that poetry by black women has suffered a critical obscurity disproportionate to its vigor and continuity through the late twentieth century. I have a profound sense that the connective capacity of poetry brings its own value to this gathering of ideas. Voice is vital to this genre. Voice is also a crucial element in naming the self, an idea that feminism has concretized. A generative exploration of how black women write and activate what hooks calls a "radical black female subjectivity" could well be elicited from the poetry of black women (51). When black women poets undertake naming, it means discovering how voice distills their very particular experiences and reflects their agency and authority. A certain poetic sense surrounds the silences and barriers black women have scaled and continue to encounter in achieving visibility as human beings. Consequently, poetry, itself a language of heightened awareness, makes for a

potent response to the inherent need to claim oneself. These issues coalesce in Lorde's essay, "Poetry is Not A Luxury" –the necessity of self-definition, the capacity of poetry to interrogate and realize suppressed voices, the personal-political power these combined initiatives produce for women – making her work another guiding light of this project.

1969

To further examine some implications that black women poets bring to acts of naming, this study focuses on Sonia Sanchez and Lucille Clifton, who have remained continuously productive poets over more than forty years. Both published their first books in the last year of a tumultuous American decade: 1969. The possibility exists that much of the tumult of the 1960s springs from the issue of naming, and its impact on all concerned. Black people, whose history and herstory in the U.S. reaches back far longer in time than that of many whites; yet, by this one-hundred and fourth year post slavery, they were still striving for full legal regard as American citizens and petitioning for the right to be treated, in their country of birth, like other humans. They took the initiative of naming themselves as human men and women, as disenfranchised Americans, as citizens for whom the Constitution was impotent. Picketing on sidewalks in the South and North, some carried signs that stated 'I Am A Man'. By advocating the Muslim faith, the Nation of Islam destabilized American notions of religion; the Nation named itself an alternative to the Christian tradition of black Americans. Malcolm Little became Malcolm X. The notoriety he generated was redoubled by the more popular Cassius Clay's transformation to Muhammad Ali. There is the poem Anne Sexton published in 1969, "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," signifying a change of names, indeed; white middle-class women began to rebel and divorce, literally and figuratively, from patriarchy and break the imposed silences of marriage and motherhood. Resistance to the Viet Nam War by ordinary Americans, recognizing and acting out their right to challenge the State and its voices of conventional power, could be seen as an effort to rename American might and foreign policy. This decade

saw the most fertile period of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) take black identity from epithet to asset and poetry further beyond the exclusionary aegis of the white male upper-class. In short, the 1960s was a time for new voices and new names.

To introduce Sanchez and Clifton in an illustrative way, I offer an example from another poet who emerged in this period. "I was born in the Congo" the speaker begins, indicating that she is Africa in artful persona: "I walked to the fertile crescent and built the sphinx" (38). She goes on to report that "I got hot and sent an ice age to Europe to cool my thirst", and later reveals that "Hannibal…gave me Rome for Mother's Day". Finally, the speaker tops a range of accomplishments, with her self-celebrating signature line: "I am so hip/even my errors are correct" (38). "Ego Tripping (there must be a reason why)", a poem so boldly delicious to the tongue that it establishes Nikki Giovanni's iconic-young-poet status, also re-energizes the oral tradition of street corner recitation in African-American communities. The poem accomplishes another coup as well: it asserts a self-defined black female identity in poetic form.

Giovanni's poem unifies racial and gender-naming in its potent structure and content. Her speaker, by naming herself a woman of grandeur and mobility, invokes feminist readings of the ancient world and pre-patriarchal societies in which powerful and divine women routinely existed. She names herself by situating her power across a sweeping expanse of Africa, by asserting an Afrocentric regard for Europe, and by enacting in the poem's language a cultural signifier of African/African-American orality–the praise poem/toast. Blackness and feminism, combined in the act of self-naming, serve here to perform another act—they unsettle one version of herstory and replace it with another. Giovanni's closing line, compliments of The Temptations—"I mean/I can fly/like a bird in the sky" (38) – leaves the implications of redefining herstory and power through a black female voice open to a sky full of possibilities.

Not accidentally, "Ego Tripping" appears during the Black Arts Movement (BAM), which provides a critical context to my study. Hyperbolic though it may be, the poem models key BAM

concerns with naming and thus, renaming black people on terms which are identifiable in Giovanni's poem and significantly, in Sanchez and Clifton's body of work. The BAM's naming project hinges on constructing affirmative performances of Blackness through culture-specific subject matter, dynamic oral and written poetic forms, and images of proactive subjects. While the Civil Rights Movement demanded change in the legal relationship between the U.S. and black people, the BAM, "aesthetic and spiritual sister" (Neal 62) to the Black Power Movement, sought positive change in black peoples' relationships to themselves.

With unapologetic fervor, the BAM's prime movers and participants articulated a forceful vision of art as self-determination and resistance to oppression for African- Americans, driven by the concept of artists as community-based cultural workers serving multiple purposes: aesthetic, political, social, economic, and educational. As it occurred, the BAM can reasonably be characterized by an ethos of intense artistic production and socio-political engagement generated by a segment of African-Americans during the mid-1960s to mid-1970s. These are individuals variously connected by ranging Black nationalist ideologies and sentiments. From the formation of UMBRA, an early 1960s think tank of poet-theorists, comes Tom Dent, Lorenzo Thomas, Raymond Patterson, and Rolland Snellings, who, later, under the name Askia Toure, acts as a BAM co-founder. It gains momentum with the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 as impetus. With a new America lurching between confrontation and compromise, some black folk become tired of agitating for rights and power within accepted institutional bounds; the climate turns ripe for a resurgence of nationalist thinking that once found favor among black Americans in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century. "We wanted an art that would actually reflect black life and its herstory and legacy of resistance," one of its founders, Amiri Baraka, states to explain this specific type of nationalism: "an art that would educate and unify black people in our attack on an anti-black racist America" ("Autobiography" x). Specifically, BAM artists see themselves as catalysts for and practitioners of social transformation in the U.S. (and

even the diaspora) by making art. That art, however, is expected to give voice and affirmation to black people, especially those in oppressed communities. It is to uphold their worth, articulate the issues those communities faced, and encourage political mobilization to resolve those issues.

The performative verve of its poetry is one of the most distinct and enduring literary gifts of the BAM. BAM artists consciously promoted the fluid, engaging style with which Giovanni's poem presents an African-American oral tradition of self-affirmation. Its deft deconstruction of received notions of herstory, culture, race, and gender through the identity and placement of an insouciant female speaker exemplifies the BAM's effort to exhort black consciousness and contest the status quo through poetry. Signifying all the way, Giovanni names a culture, an expressive tradition within that culture, a posture of resistance, and a series of worldviews to which that posture connects. She also names a speaker whose race and gender feed her empowerment, rather than compelling her to transcend –and thus, erase, them.

The BAM's attention to the transformation of personal identity as a necessary element of black social, economic, and political progress contextualizes Giovanni's poetic act of naming. Her poetic performance stands among perpetual efforts by black people in the U.S. (and elsewhere) to get on with the work of living by fashioning and advancing a positive construction of racial subjectivity. Across this public and private terrain, the BAM makes great strides. For black poets, it catalyzes changes in the way they could regard themselves, their aesthetic concerns, and their audience. As the BAM develops, poetry becomes one of its most efficient creative vehicles. Calvin Hernton's study of black women writers credits "particularly the poets" with "constitut[ing] a formidable phalanx of the consciousness-raising activities of the 1960s" (42). His point makes clear and visible the fact that at this point black women are not only active as the silent, stalwart rank-and-file in the fight for justice. Many of them are writing.

Cheryl Clarke notes that of poetry books published between "1968 to 1976…approximately 199 were books…by black women" (20). It should be appreciated,

explored, and understood that some of these women poets' work flourished as well; however, not without struggle should we understand their participation. The BAM, a movement generally and genuinely radical in some respects, fell victim to reactionary positions regarding gender roles. These prescriptive, binary notions of manhood and womanhood had remained hegemonic in the society and moreover, slavery had superimposed them on black culture as peculiarly distorted ideals. In describing the climate of sexism at the close of the 1960s, Toni Cade Bambara observes that "in some quarters of the Movement [the black woman] is being assigned an unreal role of mute servant…encouraged to cultivate 'virtues' that…sound like the personality traits of slaves" (124-125).

While there is no intent here to deny that strong currents of masculinist rhetoric existed throughout the BAM, one point this study strives to raise is that black women poets brought their own set of concerns to this movement and gendered its values to suit their needs. The cultural turn that the BAM initiated drew on long-stifled desires for political action, economic innovation, and positive images of self and community among U.S. black people; those desires were not restricted to men. Barbara Christian correctly locates the rise of black feminist theory in writing indicating that "when the ideologues of the 1960s said *black,* they meant *black male"* (348). However, she seems to overlook the possibility of black women poets as ideologues of a sort. She also misses the likelihood that women may have cultivated intentions and designs on Blackness that diverged from the stated ideology. Contemporary scholars writing about black women poets and the BAM, notably Clarke, too often rely on the habitually decontextualized, shorthand labeling of the BAM as masculinist and sexist while failing to give sufficient credence to the cogent expression of black women's concerns, needs, desires, *and agency*. Poetry has a distinct role here, particularly that published through the rise of the BAM, second wave feminism, and Black feminism. Still, this is agency we should read within a developing process of oppositional change in self-definition and representation. Among the themes covered in this

work, a largely heterosexual and sometimes patriarchal bias can be found. Where these feature arise, they coexist with others that cut across differences in political and sexual orientation among black women.

I find a broader reading important because criticism of Sanchez, especially, tends to bog down around her BAM practices. For example, Clarke's valuable book-length study of BAM women poets treats several writing between 1968 and 1978. She credits them with "revolutioniz[ing] the literary field" (1) and "open[ing] a wider field for [B]lack women fiction writers" (3) who emerged in the 1970s. The attention Sanchez accords to women receives brief notice, mainly to critique Sanchez's heterosexist view of love in a Billie Holliday poem. She seems to dismiss a great deal of the context in which Black nationalism, womanism and feminism emerged amid a climate of quickly shifting social visions, competing sexualities, and contentious politics. It is this context exactly that I find important, and embedded, in Sanchez's work–an ideology that continues to insist on political change, yet also recognizes that personal choices and ideals reflect one's political stance. Cherise Pollard's critical essay on the BAM and women poets generally supports my reading, although she, too, focuses on critiquing its sexism. As example, she analyzes Sanchez's appropriation of male speech. On balance, Pollard identifies subversion of and resistance to patriarchal attitudes among Sanchez and others, a resistance expressed through poetry that "adopts an oppositional stance" (179). Unfortunately, she also limits the "primarily political" focus of BAM women poets, summarizing that focus as "race riots, poverty, and institutionalized racism" (179). This view indirectly confers an apolitical label on "traditional issues such as rearing children and romantic relationships between men and women" (179) by setting them apart. For Sanchez, these topics are equally political, as not only she but theorists Frances Beale and Toni Cade Bambara make clear in *The Black Woman* anthology (1970). Moreover, Pollard's reading –as well as that of Elizabeth Frost, in her critical work on Sanchez – seems to conflate poems of overtly heterosexual longing for relationship with

submissive response to masculinism. Each misses the fact that traditionalism is(thankfully) lacking in the *way* Sanchez writes about love and family and in the way she privileges black women as multidimensional subjects. Finally, however, Pollard and Clarke do acknowledge Sanchez among BAM women poets whose use of voice and language redefine power.

From the BAM and the American second wave feminist movement, out of which Black feminism and womanism later emerge, naming and renaming extend into the present. Black women poets find themselves, by the mid-1970s, at the juncture of these ideologies for which agency and self-determination are central issues. Race and gender are inseparable features for such poets; identity transformation such as these movements endorsed, whether personal or collective, would be tested and stretched by black women poets (and others) to account for the positionality they routinely experience–a "double jeopardy" (109) described by Frances Beale in her 1972 essay. Publicly and privately, the questions as to how black women challenge the status quo persist: how must black women position themselves in struggles to define and advance new paradigms for race and gender? Should they have to choose? Can they be heard and acknowledged?

From this context, Sanchez and Clifton launch a confrontation of hegemonies of identity and power in general, gender, race, and class in particular, that extends into the twenty-first century. They have engaged these questions through their life experiences, activism, and writing. The poets conduct a three-pronged cultural practice that links poetry-making with history/herstory writing, launches an artistic challenge to received knowledge, and compels our recognition of literature as a political act.

The purposes of this study are multiple: a) to recognize Sanchez and Clifton's "poetry as illumination", an art which "transform[s] silence into language and action" by naming black women (Lorde 36, 40); b) to enable a reading of representation through poetry writing that features black female subjects and connects them to the herstory of their survival in the United

States; c) to assert the position of Sanchez and Clifton as representative of black women poets who contribute significantly to the BAM, a movement often decried as masculinist; d) to indicate linkages between Sanchez and Clifton's work and that of younger black women—Elizabeth Alexander, Nikky Finney, and Patricia Smith– whose poems also decidedly engage *herstory* and) to reckon with the lasting impact of values propagated by the BAM in various ways as they found form in the work of these poets.

My discussion begins with the claim that Sanchez and Clifton name black women in their poetry by focusing attention on their bodies and voicing their interiority. Through subject matter, orality, and form, the poets' work represents black women on their own terms. Consistently, in Sanchez and Clifton's art, black women's bodies defy that lasting patriarchal construction which wants to extend the Cult of True Womanhood into contemporary times by dividing strength and beauty. They urge a rethinking of Sojourner Truth. Through them we see women whose bodies are metonyms for joy, rage, mourning, and magic. These bodies are keen. They perform actively and analytically. From them, lovely and holy and painful sounds issue.

Bambara compels us toward black women's constructions of their innermost lives with her view that "you find your Self in destroying illusions, smashing myths, laundering the head of whitewash, being responsible to some truth "(132). Bambara's verbs denote behavior that seems dramatic, if not violent, and busy at the least, when compared with 'naming' as we conventionally may think of it. Naming is a ritual, perhaps ceremonially enacted. Naming is a power-filled moment and statement. Sanchez and Clifton each identify and dispatch such "myths" and "illusions" by recasting black female bodies as zones of physical and spiritual power; they confer on those bodies new bases for representation, new names. For black women, Collins states, "[n]aming becomes a way of transcending the limitations of intersecting oppressions" (118). Opal J. Moore supports this signification in writing about Elizabeth Alexander, about whom I will elaborate in Chapter Four. Alexander's poem restores the name of

the African woman caged for exhibit in Europe as 'The Venus Hottentot' and thus, "begins to revise the hateful history of Saartjie Baartman who did not have the voice to 'work' her own word magic, to effect a language and mind of transformative power, the power to dethrone an alien god" (5).

This cultural work goes beyond making art alone; it also renames black women by resisting their historical experiences of commodification, degradation and silence. Working to open up literary space for alternative images and voices, Sanchez and Clifton renounce and displace this legacy. In that space, readers may learn, from black women, how they realize their bodies as contentious texts and their writing as voicing opposition to multiple suppressions. This reading of Clifton and Sanchez argues that their poetry contributes to converting black women from their perceived designation as objects, to subjects. They clarify meanings of desire and sexuality as black women may choose to define them. Consequently, I argue that through naming, their work contributes to an emotional herstory for black women.

This poetry, which converts the ideal of black self-determination to cultural praxis, aligns Sanchez and Clifton with goals envisioned and advocated by the BAM: the rejection of oppressive Western cultural practices in favor of affirmative, liberatory ones that reclaim and rename black people—male and female. The emotional herstory that I trace in their work has a place in these liberatory practices, perceived and also stated by Neal. "We had to dig each other…on our own terms, and on the basis of the common emotional history that we shared" ("New Consciousness" 131), he writes, addressing the imperatives that drove BAM activists. His view counters perceptions that the BAM constructed Blackness and self-determination only in superficial or hyper-political terms. His claim that "[w]e will take a stand in the history primarily on the basis of our own emotional history" shows that Neal also recognizes black emotional experience as significant and sees the larger implications of representational power in conveying it (131). Sanchez and Clifton's work, which I explore beyond the time frame of the

BAM, extends these values very specifically to black women: they gender nationalist self-determination by incorporating black feminist concerns.

My argument is also rooted in the feminist concept of herstory, defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as history emphasizing the role of women or told from a woman's point of view; also, a piece of historical writing by or about women." Among early uses of the term, it cites this 1976 example from *Words & Women* viii. 135: "When women in the movement use *herstory*, their purpose is to emphasize that women's lives, deeds, and participation in human affairs have been neglected or undervalued in standard histories" (OED online). As used here, herstory validates writing as an act of agency and identifies a concern for justice—in this case, regarding the "undervalued" voices of black women. My use of the term also distinguishes the continuing feminist work of recovery– recognizing the lives of women that feminists must take responsibility for uncovering, illuminating as gendered narratives, and linking to larger issues. This project may have dominated the early decades of feminist scholarship with respect to middle-class white women's subjectivity and now seem passé. However, as black feminist critics have repeatedly emphasized, black women's subjectivity remains far less explored.

A central premise for this claim is aptly summarized by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, writing that "[t]he profit motive and the insatiable desire for cheap labor during slavery in the New World reinforced the images of African women as beasts of burden, workhorses, and hypersexual"(23). Moreover, the appropriation of black women's bodies in Western culture and its societies as commodified, sexually degraded, and silenced objects during and long after slavery, persists well into the late twentieth century. Their representation as such also continues, manifested in hegemonic ideology and action and ingrained into 'high' and popular American culture. This herstory of cultural disfigurement via combined race and gender, treats black women paradoxically. Theirs is a context which Western capitalist patriarchy has historically represented and reinforced as powerless, yet strong. To be clear, adding visual representation of

women to patriarchy is an equation bound to produce, at minimum, commodification and hegemonic silencing. Black women face that reality in ways that deserve detailed attention.

Patricia Morton's *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women,* which devotes itself to "how black women's herstory has figured in a century of historiography," provides clarity here (ix). She summarizes public perceptions of contemporary black women as follows: "the sex object, the 'tragic mulatto'…the inept, comical servant, and the masculinized, domineering matriarch", which, added together, form a "composite picture of …defeminized female failure" as well as "members of a subordinate caste" (7). These poets' efforts convey a keen understanding of the stark positional terms set out in the title of Gloria Hull's 1982 book, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Hull's title raises a rallying cry that takes particular shape in Clifton and Sanchez's poetry. Recognizing that **"**Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and.., on the other hand, been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism", Lorde underscores the daily meaning of this positionality. Moreover, these scholars add urgency to the need for a poetics that devotes considerable energy to black women's lives, inside and out (42).

Still, the emotional herstory at issue herein is worth a pause. What does an emotional herstory of black women mean? We might think of it as a set of poetic narratives through which we find evidence of black women's actions and reactions to themselves, their lives, and their material conditions. They are central subjects, not incidental in position or context. Coming through poems, this herstory illuminates interiority. An emotional herstory of black women reveals, for example, what constitutes joy, rage, happiness, dissatisfaction, and contentment in a society which could trigger Zora Neale Hurston to symbolize them as "the mule of de worl'" (29). Such a herstory provides a valuable alternative reading of black women's subjectivity that deconstructs the mythologies of Mammy, the Tragic Mulatto, Sapphire, and Jezebel. Yet it also brings perspective, showing attentive readers the reductive intent of those representational

myths, how they persist across time, and how they compare with self-defined constructions of black women.

This framework also levies a deliberate challenge to the idea of historiography as a means of writing (and thus, thinking) about history characterized by a prose narrative and relying upon critical sources. Indeed, Lucille Clifton demonstrates how her experiential and emotional knowledge contests this idea in her poem, "why some people be mad at me sometimes":

> they ask me to remember
> but they want me to remember
> their memories
> and i keep on remembering
> mine (*NX* 20)

At readings, Clifton routinely complements this poem with a story. While serving as Poet Laureate of Maryland, she was asked to write a poem in keeping with an upbeat celebration of the state's colonial history—an idea that readily and distinctly opposed her way of seeing that history. This poem—not the eventual product, but a more important result—exemplifies her resistance in its diction and structure. Her vernacular shrugging off of conventional grammar in the title instills a tone of resistant indifference. Signifying that if anyone "be mad" at the speaker, it is clearly their problem alone, Clifton underscores the point with line breaks. The key issue of memory, repeated at the end of the first three lines, almost tilts the poem to one side. What "they" want is shown to be insignificant, as opposed to the speaker's wishes. She does remember steadily, and this act faces down "they" from the other end of these lines. She knows there are other ways of reading memory, but she is not beholden to these constructions which would subjugate (benignly or not) her worldview. She has chosen her own experience, as black feminist epistemology does. The word "mine" denotes that position as the final fact of this poem. In nineteen words spread across five lines, Clifton's poem calmly holds its ground against perceptions of American history that are racist, patriarchal, white, classist, and sexist, an utter

erasure of the knowledge that compels her short poem. "What I'm writing is also history" Clifton asserts. "And some of it is the history of the inside of us; and some…is the history of the outside" (Rowell 59). Historiography may or may not involve the recounting of an official story, sanctioned and therefore repeated; herstoriography for my purposes means a telling of black women's experience that diverts from hegemonically sanctioned forms and content. Of course, claiming poetry as herstory moves that diversion several degrees further from the hegemonic.

My discussion proceeds with awareness of the ways that liberatory ideologies may also limit and exclude, as I have noted with respect to Black nationalism and feminism. It does not claim to be comprehensive, to essentialize, or to speak uniformly for black women of all classes, sexual identities, or ideologies. In fact, the discussion of herstory in this study seeks to avoid "the kind of glorification…that has the potential to repress and contain", preferring to read the poets' efforts within cultural theory, practice, and movements that reflect identity construction (hooks 46). I also recognize Sanchez and Clifton within an African-American poetic continuum. The stories of black women's emotions that I locate in their poems gain momentum from earlier work such as that by Helene Johnson and Georgia Douglas Johnson in the 1920s. This tradition becomes more apparent in certain poems by Margaret Walker. Certainly in this respect, both poets stand squarely on the shoulders of Gwendolyn Brooks' groundbreaking Bronzeville poems and novella, *Maude Martha*. What I also find worthy of discussion is the extent to which Sanchez and Clifton are capable of expanding the evidence of this suppressed herstory plainly *and* artfully; furthermore, they do so on consciously political terms, at times when Blackness and feminism are not necessarily fashionable expressions. One meaningful literary outcome of their consistency, which I treat in the closing chapter, is the continued attention to this concern among younger poets.

Moreover, an emotional herstory indicates what is missing in the perhaps well-intended, perhaps prescriptive, but also superficial valorization of black women by male writers often

espoused during the Black Arts Movement. These depictions actually inform the gender consciousness of the period; they are limiting only when read as supplanting black women's own constructions of self. We gain greater, and much-needed, critical perspective on that movement and its meanings by reading Sanchez and Clifton closely. Their poems also articulate a tangible broadening of black feminist concerns**.** One voice at a time, one black woman at a time, this herstorical interpretation of emotion gains for its subjects the long-unacknowledged privilege of interiority. Its formal routes and modes of discourse coalesce with its treatment of black women.

My claim builds on an interlocking framework of critical theories that address cultural practices—poetry in this case– as forms of representation and expressions of power. Consequently, I draw upon black feminist thought as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins as the primary theoretical model for its wholistic –meaning spiritual, social, cultural, economic, and political–attention to black women's experience and to the specific ways in which black women make meaning. Black feminist thought as outlined by Collins provides a valuable lens for readings of the black female body by Sanchez and Clifton. It offers an epistemology that embraces, at its base, black women's experiences. Collins interprets black women's experiences as inherently oppositional, reading them as events framed by a herstory of racial and gender oppression (10-11). That herstory is complemented by patterns of black female representation in American culture that Patricia Morton calls "a distinctive and profoundly disempowering, composite image of black womanhood" (ix).

I take seriously the position of womanism as an alternative stance broached by Alice Walker and upheld by Sherley Anne Williams. [ii] However, I choose Black feminism as my operative term because Collins makes a distinction about black feminist thought similar enough to Walker's womanism. Collins states that:

> Self is not defined as increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found in the context of family and community…Rather than defining self in opposition to others, the connectedness among individuals provides Black women deeper, more meaningful self-definitions (113).

While Collins' assertion is admittedly somewhat problematic, veering closer to a binary interpretation of the self, I hold that black feminist thought articulates and generally develops womanism's concerns as spelled out by Walker. It strives to recognize black women's identity claims as individuals and also seeks a transformation of gender consciousness that speaks to black communities as well.

It makes some sense to suppose that black women's poetry addressing black female bodies and ultimately, herstories, take place within a framework linked directly to black women, even though it also has resonance beyond race or gender. This alternative reading of black women's subjectivity, then, demonstrates black feminist epistemology. It need not justify itself within a racist patriarchal hegemony context which fails to recognize and/or validate that very subjectivity. It provides alternative terms for the discussion to thrive in its own context, and any comparative discussion takes place secondarily. Collins defines black feminist epistemology as one that

> that uses …standards…consistent with Black women's criteria for substantiated knowledge and with our criteria for methodological adequacy based on "an experiential, material base, collective experiences and accompanying worldviews…based on our particular herstory (256).

Although Collins identifies four major elements of this epistemology, the most applicable for this study privileges "[l]ived [e]xperience as a [c]riterion of [m]eaning" (101) over Western perceptions of knowledge as scientific and quantifiable. She links experience and primary

sources with wisdom, distinguishing it from knowledge and secondary sources. More specifically, Collins bases her theory on black historical and cultural phenomena, such as women's workplace experiences. She holds that experience has been critical to African-American survival, and thus, that experience has credibility (101-102). Because black women tend to know the nature of their survival strategies and narratives, they possess a kind of knowledge far less available, if at all, to external sources.

Admittedly, at first mention, wisdom seems so entirely unstable a basis for analysis as to be useless –unless we keep in mind the importance of reading experience in a herstorical and cultural vein. Knowledge substantiated by personal experience is knowledge of a specific type. Stating that "[k]nowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential for the survival of the subordinate" (257), Collins reminds us of Lorde's assertion that "in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive" (42). As an idea which privileges the body in the formation of knowledge, wisdom-based knowledge is especially useful here. Black feminist epistemology welcomes women's voices and daily experiences out of hiding and dismissal, into cultural conversation through Clifton and Sanchez.

Collins specifically cites poetry in her epistemological framework:

> As an historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression… [T]he form assumed by this thought [can] diverge from standard academic theory…[in] the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like (9).

This oppositional view of knowledge frees poetry from limitation as an ahistorical, apolitical art form. This willingness to reckon with multiple functions within black feminist poetics bolsters the connection between poetry and herstory. In other words, black feminist thought recognizes

poetry by black women, because of its intellectual and herstorical context, not only as praxis but also as a way of theorizing. As a deliberate confirmation of that stance, I privilege the poets' voices in concert with other critics. Interviews with Sanchez and Clifton, therefore, bring invaluable nuance to this study.

Situated Knowers

Collins states that "[l]ived experience as a criterion for credibility frequently is invoked by U.S. Black women when making knowledge claims" (257). Sanchez and Clifton's speakers can, generally, be read as women. The speaker's involvement with or engagement by the matter at hand tends to be immediate and central, not peripheral or distant. They speak often in contexts of private meditation and lyrical reflection, often regarding an act of their own or one they have witnessed. Both are also known to write, at times, with an autobiographical resonance, blurring the line between the speaker and their own personas. This is especially true of Clifton. She explains to Charles Rowell that "My 'I' tends to be both me Lucille and the me that stands for people who look like me, and the me that is also human" (59).

Collins would call these speakers "situated knowers" (19) whose willingness to draw on their own experience is a vital element of black feminist practice. Given that the subject matter we are discussing is black women, their bodies, and their emotions, the mantle of situated knower applies to the poets as well. Their awareness of their own human worth and that of other black women might be their most valuable knowledge base. In that vein, they also realize the value of positive self-worth and connectivity among people; they display that consciousness, in poems and interviews, as a broader wish for a society that values wholeness. On balance, both poets have also inherited, by virtue of their own social positions, an affinity for the oppressed and an attention to the unseen and unrepresented.

Mine is not an essentialist view that would suggest simply by being born black women the poets have access to a common body of knowledge, readily applicable to black women subjects in their work. Collins's point, and mine as well, is that situated knowers validate and privilege lived experience. Sanchez and Clifton may write about anything, in any way; their creative choices do vary. Here I wish to emphasize, however, that their experiences does indeed have its place –as owners of black female bodies, born into a racist, patriarchal twentieth century U.S. culture, as children of southern migrants raised in northern cities, as daughters and sisters, as workers, neighbors, wives, and mothers, as writer-activist-professors—as well as simply complex human beings. This knowledge, based on their own lived experience and that of other black women, indeed undergirds and informs their poems.

This matter of the poet's self-hood also makes for controversy, as it seems to defy literary conventions that typically insist upon a sharp divide between the poet and the persona. It is an important tenet to uphold, in order for poems to avoid simplistic readings, although it may sustain some problematizing. Collins might even see this position as privileging external knowledge and notions of objectivity over internal wisdom, and the subjective. Perhaps some variation of 'art for art's sake' lurks here also, an effort to focus on the poem as a made thing apart from context. Nellie McKay, however, shows that such a view, even if inadvertent, overlooks specific historical conditions which contextualize the work of many black writers (as historical conditions inevitably contextualize the work writers produce). It is possible and ever more expected that some twenty-first century black writers will privilege other than racial or gender contexts. However, McKay writes that, for black writers, "The life story (or portions of it) has been the most effective forum for defining black selfhood in a racially oppositional world" (96). Because of this opposition, she adds, these writers

> did not and could not participate in an ideology of self that separated the self from the black community and the roots of its culture. Consequently, the personal narrative becomes a *historical* site on which *aesthetics*, *self confirmation of humanity* [my italics],

> citizenship, and the significance of racial politics shaped African-American literary expression" (96).

I take McKay's point in the poems under discussion in the following chapters. These poems not only reveal themselves as a forum for "defining [B]lack [female] selfhood" but also as a location of herstory. Whether the lived experience they uncover comes from the actual lives of Clifton or Sanchez is hardly critical. et also be read as a persona as well. I find a useful response in Clifton's preference for approaches that value duality, or as she frames it, "both/and" rather than "either/or" (Rowell 59).

It is conceivable that the voice speaking a poem may spring from the poet's experience and knowledge; effective poems tend to reach beyond their springboards. Poet Cate Marvin writes that "A good poem…enters the reader's mind and heart like a rocket. On leaving the atmosphere, it drops the launching gear of experience that served as impetus for its creation. Who wrote the poem, the life the person lived or is living, will not matter once the poem takes on a life of its own" (para. 5). It is the point of launch that I link with situated knowing. Knowledge that may speak to black women is valuable as a base for poetry aimed at a world in which these women function. Sanchez confirms that fluidity and caution in reading a speaker's voice are both possible in a 2005 interview with Khadija Sesay: "[M]ost of the creative process has got to do with the people I've seen, the lives of women I've seen, so although I use 'I', I mean the communal 'I'… Of course your life does inform some of your poems, but if they know a little bit about your life, they assume that all the rest is about your life, too" (147).

It is important to understand that the idea of poets as situated knowers should not be dismissed or reductively labeled pejoratively as confessional. The apparent adaptation of personal experience—most pointed in Clifton's work, where some poems name their personas "lu", "lucy one-eye", and "Lucille Clifton"–does not limit the quality or the impact of their poems. For example, *Next* (1988) addresses many poems to the stages of her bouts with breast

cancer and the aftermath of her husband's death. Sanchez's debut volume and its title poem, *homecoming,* captures aspects of the speaker's young womanhood in New York City as she realizes the contested intersections of gender, race, and class. Drawing themselves as autobiographical subjects constructs for readers a concrete consciousness of black women's voices and bodies, engaged with the craft of making the poems, which entails *being made by them*. I find a parallel sense of purpose, what Collins calls a "rearticulation of consciousness", in Clifton's statement that "the poet, it seems to me, or the teller, you know, has the obligation not to run away from the stories that she or he knows", and yet "none of us tells the whole thing" (Collins 118, Rowell 60). The poets seem to be reiterating Clifton's recognition of duality on this issue– the autobiographical thread or inference does not taint or restrict a poem's dimensions.

Their work reveals an awareness of realities that are, indeed, common and particular not only to them, but to numbers of U.S. black women because intersecting oppressions have established some patterns. This concept is crucial to appreciating the multidimensional nature of these poets. It asserts that a kind of culture born of U.S. black women's encounters tends to produce a particular knowledge base. Grounded in that often-missing element of black female experience, the view of Clifton and Sanchez as situated knowers foments a dialogue with other genres, literatures and identities. Collins writes that "Black feminist thought must… be tied to Black women's lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some way…encompasses general knowledge that helps U.S. Black women survive in, cope with, and resist our differential treatment" (31). McKay clarifies the issue: this "differential treatment" extends as far as the need to confirm black people as fully rendered humans. Certainly, given the protracted devaluation of African-American life and struggles for justice, U.S. black women might need to follow Sojourner Truth in confirming vocally that they are human and also women of a particular experience.

Framing poetry in a way that finds its social content and commentary as important as its aesthetic and technical capacity is an incendiary move from the perspective of scholars like Gates. In "Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature", Houston Baker recounts the great exception Gates takes to theories which align literary work with any social value or interpret it in relationship to any sort of nonliterary inquiry or project (313-316). This view stands apart from black feminist epistemology in its differing definition and validation of knowledge and in polar opposition to the BAM's advance of art as social and political engagement. I concur with Baker that for these poets, language is a social institution, and from it emerge poems containing diverse, meaningful social resonance and technical prowess (314). These features need not be separated. Moreover, in their work, I point to innovative formal adaptations that show them enlarging and experimenting with this institution in ways that yield excitement for the close readings Gates prizes in New Critical fashion. Again, I see Sanchez and Clifton's capacity to show readers "what it means to envision the African-American cultural tradition as plural, not singular" (Smith 94).

Black feminist epistemology amounts to an alternative definition of knowledge. It decenters the impulse to privilege knowledge as constructed by a racist patriarchal hegemony. If we think of the legal system of the United States alone, with its three-fifths compromise and Black Codes as examples of hegemonic knowledge used to suppress black survival, we can see that while knowledge of the American legal structures and government is useful on its face, such knowledge is inadequate to account for that which has fueled the black survival Collins affirms. It thrives in a context intended to oppress black people, rendering them invisible if not expendable. Experiential knowledge, in turn, thrives in a context in which black people can locate themselves as viable human beings and their perspectives as worthy of expression. Lorde cites the power of experience as knowledge:

> [O]ur feelings…become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas…[f]or within living structures defined by profit, by linear

> power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive…feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men. But women have survived. As poets. (38-39).

The discipline of Black cultural studies, with its concerns for signifiers of identity, of power, and of language as a cultural practice, has bearing on the entire study. Stuart Hall's idea of "position", which states that "we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific" ("Cultural Identity" 222) certainly provides a pretext for my assessment of the poets' relationships to the Black Arts Movement in particular and to their entire writing careers in general. The fluidity which comes with seeing poetry as a herstoriographic tool allows room for Hall's idea of a "*production* of identity… grounded… in the re-telling of the past" which "undergo[es] constant transformation" (225). Concerns for black women's representation as discussed by bell hooks, specifically regarding racialized constructions of gender, also enters into discussion of the poems themselves. Her perspective is also useful to my view of the poetry as oppositional cultural practice. "Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see," hooks writes (116). For all of these theorists, the power to self-define looms large as a connecting theme.

Each poet launches a challenge to received knowledge, identifying specific epistemologies and favoring constructionist alternatives to absolute truths. They also regard the bodies and voices of other black women. This stance alone would refute the notion of the dominant culture that black women's bodies are subject rather than object. However, there is also the matter of how, as poets, they achieve this signification. Ultimately, this discussion also recognizes spoken and written language as forms of power which the act of writing poetry combines. Undertaking a black feminist and cultural studies lens also means that context is a necessary facet of textual analysis: black women's enslavement and double oppression is as important to the diction and form as it is to Sanchez and Clifton's choices of content.

Chapter Two, "Motion and Movement: Sonia Sanchez's Blues Testimony," addresses manifestations of the body and voice. This chapter takes examples from *homecoming* (1969), *We a BadddDD People* (1970), *I've Been a Woman* (1978), *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (1984), *Wounded in the House of a Friend* (1995), *Under a Soprano Sky (1987),* and her most recent collection, *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems* (1999), which reprints some of the early poems . (Following their listing above, I have coded these volumes in the text as *h,WBP, IBW, HH, WHF, USS,* and *SL*.) Chapter Two asserts that Sanchez names the black female body through gestures that signify touch and connection, and through speakers whose goals are reckoning and testimony. I consider orality in her work by connecting Sanchez to a vernacular style representative of African-American south-to-north migration. Formally, Chapter Two explores Sanchez's application of the blues, the chant, and the typographical slash to express black women's emotional conditions.

In Chapter Three, "Lucille Clifton: 'a city /of a woman,'" poems under discussion come from *Good Woman,* which collapses the collections *Good Times* (1969)*, Good News About the Earth* (1972), *An Ordinary Woman* (1974)*,* and *Two-Headed Woman* (1980). Other poems derive from *Next* (1987)*, Quilting* (1991), *The Book of Light* (1993), *The Terrible Stories* (1996), and *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems* (2000) which contains some works more difficult to access. (Again in accord with this list, the works are coded as *GW, NX, Q, BL, TS, and BLB*.) Choosing from Clifton's many body-centered poems, I focus on some in which she finds the black female body both beautiful and strong, and others wherein she highlights its magic and mystery. I take up some ways in which her speakers perform a particular naming of black women also, through vernacular and cultural references. Emotional herstory takes shape, I maintain, in a reading of Clifton's uses of white space within various poems.

Identifying some outcomes of Clifton and Sanchez's substantial bodies of work along these lines is the goal of Chapter Four, "Naming Is Renaming: Sanchez, Clifton, and Poetic

Herstory". Its claim is that their naming of black women throughout their careers marks a trail that younger poets Nikky Finney, Patricia Smith, and Elizabeth Alexander have seen the need to continue and diversify in form, orality and subject matter. In the course of these connections, black women's naming leads us to see their subjectivity and emotional herstory with an expanding clarity that constitutes renaming. Chapter Four links this renaming to one of the BAM's fundamental tenets, self-determination.

Ideally this work enlarges, in its fashion, the strikingly spare scholarship on Clifton and Sanchez, given their consistent publishing histories from 1969 to the present. Mari Evans' *Black Women Writers, 1950-1980: A Critical Evaluation* (1984) an early exception, is innovative in that she includes the writers as subjects and as theorists. Evans's book is a rare work of its time, partially supplemented by Claudia Tate's collection of interviews (Clifton is missing), *Black Women Writers At Work* (1984). Each poet gains gradual critical attention through the late nineties, appearing more steadily as dissertation subjects after 2000. As a poet and a scholar, I am encouraged by the dissertations over the past decade that focuses on Sanchez (David Lawrence, 2003, and Jamie D. Walker, 2005) and Clifton (McCormick, 1998, and Bauer, 1998) and aim to contribute to this terrain.

Hillary Holladay's *Wild Blessings* (2004), a critical text on Clifton, is the only one of its kind; Mary Jane Lupton, however, adds a literary biography of this poet. In numerous essays focused on Clifton, scholars respond most to her autobiographical impulses, interest in Biblical figures, diction, and compressed style. Women's studies scholars embrace her poems about the body.[iii] My work blends several of these interests by addressing the body and the voice. In linking Clifton's body poems specifically to black women and their emotional herstories, I seek to follow writing on this topic by Ajuan Mance by covering a wider range of poems.

Interest in Sanchez has also increased since the Evans text. Those devoted specifically to Sanchez include Joyce's Afrocentrically-focused analysis, *Ijala: Sonia Sanchez and the African*

Poetic Tradition (1996), the now-defunct journal, *b. ma: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review*, and an important collection of interviews, *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez* (2008). Texts by Benston and Sell, followed by the dissertations of Jennifer D. Ryan (2004) and Richard A. Quinn(2000) indicate that Sanchez tends to draw scholars to her sonic qualities and performativity in tandem with other writers, although there have been exceptions.[iv] Although more criticism on Sanchez in BAM-related studies has emerged, her poetry is too often limited to that period. I hope to help broaden attention to both poets by mixing their early work with more recent collections and by reading Clifton as a BAM poet in the following discussions.

Although Clifton and Sanchez are contemporaries, however, they are rarely paired in critical discourse. Sanchez is credited as a founder of the BAM, while Clifton readily states that at its height she was busy raising a family (Rowell 66). Clifton's poetry (and children's books), I attest, manifest involvement with the BAM's principles, rather than its ideology, as indicated by her exclusion from Smethurst's recent study of the Movement. I hope that my study adds some complication to readings of these two poets and further, has some role in enabling an "ongoing critical discourse" around the BAM which David Lionel Smith calls for in 1991 (94).

As literary scholarship on the BAM period has begun to accumulate over the past twenty years, critical attention to black women poets who emerged in that period has been uneven at best, and slim overall. Clarke's *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (2005) is the most specific example of positive change. Scholarly attention linking black women poets in the context of the BAM has, in general, been affected by negative views of the BAM itself. Initially, much of its treatment followed high-status scholars such as Henry Louis Gates in castigation of the BAM as a naïve exercise in Black nationalist essentialism, dismissal, and a silence equivalent to erasure. His position encourages the oft-made claim that the BAM was a masculinist movement that constructed, and performed in order to enforce, a narrow and prescriptive notion of Blackness. Some of this criticism tends to serve as a veiled excuse to

critique, if not mock, Black nationalism in general and in particular, the Amiri Baraka of that time, often while questioning his degree of leadership in the movement. Such criticism also sidesteps its own critical practice in blatantly de-contextualizing the BAM and 1960s U.S. society by reading it through a 21st century lens.

Moreover, my project complements work by a growing number of scholars attending to the meaning and value of the BAM's cultural legacy. Textual approaches to BAM poetry include Kimberly Benston's *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism,* and Nielsen's very fine *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism,* which is part literary history as well. Tony Bolden's *Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture*, James Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s,* and Mike Sell's *Avant Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theater, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* respectively collect cultural analyses of blues and jazz forms, the Left's influence on the BAM, and that of the avant-garde. Each text also reflects various levels of theoretical conceptualization. In Eddie S. Glaude Jr.'s *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism,* there is some attention to the making of art in larger cultural contexts. The appearance of Margo Natalie Crawford and Lisa Gail Collins' *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement,* establishes an encouraging openness to women, although only Cherise Pollard addresses poetry specifically. Of a number of dissertations related to the BAM, Regina Jennings (1992) and Howard Rambsy (2004) exemplify advances in critical discourse which recognize and engage the BAM's importance to American and African-American studies and literature.

In writing about black women's bodies and visual art, Lisa Collins remarks that "[s]ince this body has been overseen, viewed as perpetually available, a curio, erotica, and exotica, it is not surprising that its representation has either upheld these confines or been avoided altogether" (Collins "Pornography"122). Fortunately black women poets come along to fill the

void these stark choices leave, making imagery that refutes these limits. Clifton and Sanchez know where back women 'be', as either poet might say. They turn their gaze to mirrors, bodies, private communions, and park benches, to situate black women consciously in their poems. Insistent upon new narratives, they name them organically, in ways that issue from material conditions and interior states. Very quickly, we find that these are black women who do not conform neatly to types. Lucid and loving bag ladies, witchy grandmothers and angry, alienated teens are among the women who appear in their work, complicating limited notions of black female identity and making clear that "[m]ost African-American women simply do not define themselves as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, mules, or sexually denigrated women" (99).

Clifton and Sanchez continue to be important because they continue to write with consciousness of self-definition that has meaning for gender studies, African-American studies, and poetry—beyond any national borders. Secondly, by continuing to write, these poets nourish a literary direction among younger poets that reveals the validity and necessity of the BAM as a transformative movement. They remain important by fearlessly invite readers into communion with their words and intentions. This acknowledgement, which is justice, is another way in which they fearlessly name themselves. The explosive impact of this literary effort should not be understated. Writing the particular, accumulated, and suppressed knowledge black women bring to bear amplifies the power of this work. Sanchez and Clifton assemble literary vehicles that write into realms that have seen little attention. They broach taboos, shine light, and turn up the volume.

CHAPTER TWO

MOTION AND MOVEMENT: SONIA SANCHEZ'S BLUES TESTIMONY

"while the body prowls
the soul catalogues each step"[v]
- Sonia Sanchez

The following lines by Sonia Sanchez first led me– most directly as a black woman, and later, as a poet and scholar– to know that poems could name and recognize me as an individual whose personal story meant something beyond the world of my mind.

let the bells ring.
BELLS. BELLS. BELLS.
Ring the bells to announce
This your earth mother.
For the day is turning
In my thighs And you are born
BLACK GIRL....
i can see you coming
girl made of black braids
i can see you coming
in the arena of youth
girl shaking your butt to double dutch days
i can see you coming
girl racing dawns
i can see you coming
girl made of black rain
i can see you coming. (*IBW* 56)

Through these lines, I found tremendous personal affirmation in the unlikely public space of a published poem. Reading that the birth of a black girl might be warmly anticipated and important beyond one's family, that her life might be "made of black rain" was stunning (56). The world as I knew it did not assign such ideas any certainty or currency that I could identify. Joining myth and higher vision with daily living as it did, in the poem I also found the message that destiny and promise could rise through the qualities of a life I recognized, most

notably in the word "double dutch." Discovering this as a *written and disseminated* idea was a great joy.

I recognize this sort of life-changing outcome in words from Helene Cixous, another celebrator of poetry, who writes that "Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (279). Her injunction that "women must write through their bodies" helped spur, in women's studies and in literature, in academia and across global cultures, the sort of revolution that began for me with Sanchez's work (290). This fact remains true and significant, despite the drubbing (even when deserved) and revisions that feminism has undergone in recent decades. That revolution has brought me through the "trampled spaces", the "partitions,regulations and codes", lit by an understanding that writing could begin the undoing of systems, mindsets, and behaviors that seemed impossible to change (282, 290).

That revolution is one Sonia Sanchez shares in and continues to advance; she recognizes and makes us aware, in her work as a poet, that much about the herstories of black women remain largely unconsidered and unexplored. In a writing career shaped by her passion for human rights and justice, she situates black women's bodies as sites of discovery. In these bodies, arguably among the most commodified, the suppressed herstories of black women are inscribed. Sanchez's poems enable a reading of black women's emotional herstory through her close attention to their bodies and voices. To do so, I recognize, is to inform and enrich the power of poetry. The unfolding interaction of humans and art in this twenty-first century compels me to make plain that poetry is vital to our living, as are the experiences of black women. This chapter examines some of the ways Sanchez brings these together. The chapter opens with an overview of Sanchez's influences, approaches, and themes. I follow by examining a representative range of her poems to illustrate how that work names black women's bodies through her choices of subject matter, orality, and form.

To read Sonia Sanchez's body of work from 1969 to the present is to recognize a sustained concern for justice, the lives of the oppressed, and values that uplift humanity. That concern at times expands to a global address in her poems. Often she privileges women's lives and perspectives to frame those broad concerns. The marriage of patriarchy and capitalism which produced colonialism creates an intersectionality of oppressions by race, gender, and class with particular severity for black women. Sanchez's knowledge of this intersection is intimate and accumulated. Her knowledge is informed by her personal life as an African-American woman of working-class origins and middle-class education, by her place and time in American culture, and by her political choices as a poet. Unapologetically, then, Sanchez often turns her attention to black women as speakers and subjects.

In many interviews (e.g. Leibowitz, 1985; Highsmith-Taylor, 1990; Johnson- Bailey, 1998), Sanchez, whose mother died when she was a year old, recounts the profound impact of older black women –her grandmother and family friends—on her knowledge base and worldview. Because of such women, she is "always in touch with…female ancestors (Johnson-Bailey, "Telling" 76),"and this bond reinforces her sense of mission. "I carry the mamas, I carry the sisters, the women who were on the block being sold," she states (76). This context enables us to read in Sanchez the qualities of a "situated knower," an agent of black feminist thought, and not unlike Gramsci's depiction of the organic intellectual, disrupting received notions of knowledge and power (Collins 19, Hall 281). As a poet whose work looks to black women past and present, on the world stage, in the neighborhood, and within her, Sanchez is well situated to enact black feminist thought through the cultural practice of poetry.

As it "involves challenging the very terms of intelligent discourse itself" (Collins 15), this theoretical stance, like Sanchez's poetry, speaks to the larger issues of this project, one of which is validating the idea of herstoriography. It allows me to position this discussion in opposition to conventional notions of historiography that would have us accept black women's diminution,

commodification, and erasure, (or all three) as accurate responses to the broader meaning of their experiences. Black feminist thought also sharpens the contours of hegemony; it makes visible and injects meaning into lives and herstories which even movements for change have stifled: those of black women. Because literary critics generally warm to African-American fiction more readily than poetry and even then, to poets other than Sanchez, the inclusiveness of poetry within black feminist thought allows us to appreciate her assertion that "the poet is a creator of social values" (*Conversations* 62).

"[W]hile the [B]ody [P]rowls": Connective Acts and Gestures[vi]

Overtly and subtly, Sanchez compels black women's bodies to motion, and uses their corporeal form to name them in various ways. I emphasize poems that feature decisive actions and subtle, interpretive gestures as means of naming those bodies. Among the many ways of locating pattern, I recognize two tendencies within a number of poems that appear in print between 1969 and 2000. The first category of poems features physical motion and touch. These position black women's bodies to strive for connection. In these, Sanchez constructs black women speakers and subjects whose actions signify efforts to convey love, grief, respect, and other intangibles. A second type I describe as poems of reckoning and testimony. Action, in this case, focuses on verbal engagement. The voice in these invokes, announces, sings, testifies, and prays. This voice is imbued with spiritual resonance, empowered by her choices of form. In the poems discussed below, action and gesture allow Sanchez to confer agency on black women, thereby raising a clearer, more imaginable sense of their subjectivity and self-regard. They also show us how Sanchez envisions and claims the black female body and spirit, a claim that will later be shown as related to the mission of the Black Arts Movement. I note, however, that efforts to categorize Sanchez too tightly, a poet whose style is complex and fluid over a long career, is best acknowledged as a matter of informative mapping rather than an absolute, with much overlap in play.

The motion in Sanchez's often lyric poems tends to call our attention to immediate experience and emotion, even if some larger herstory looms and resonates. The speech acts that occur in these poems expose fears, desires, and imaginations to the reader that shed specific light on black female interiority**.** That is, in a sense Butler recognizes and which Austin would embrace, her use of language is performative, a "coincidence of signifying and enacting" (Butler 44). Black women gain meaning as she names and voices their movement and speech through her work. Nor does Sanchez not leave such performative moments on the page; in decades of public speaking, she consistently demonstrates this dynamism in word and gesture. Motion is a dominant theme in Sanchez's own life and undoubtedly colors her efforts to articulate connection in artful terms. A migrant from Alabama to New York City in the waning years of the Great Migration's post-war phase, as a young woman she moved between the white downtown of Hunter College and the black uptown world of Harlem. Later, as a poet-activist, she supported her family by criss-crossing the country for a series of teaching positions. As of this writing, Sanchez remains a traveler, speaking and reading her work around the world. Consequently a speaker may at times represent the poet herself, since Sanchez is known to deploy a poetics which allows her own voice and circumstances to permeate and fuse with the persona of the speaker/subject.

This motion and movement, to borrow a pet phrase of the poet, appears in "present." The poem is part of an autobiographically-based series first published her 1972 volume, *A Blues Book for BlueBlack Magical Women*. In third-person voice, it captures the impressionistic narrative of a woman in transition. Although a knowing reader might suss out Sanchez's personal traces, the poem's intent is to build imagery that conveys larger existential questions in visual terms. The poem propels its speaker's body through a lush, sensual world on a bold journey. It opens, "This woman vomiting her/hunger over the world" and lengthens the introduction for eighteen lines. In a triple feat of figurative naming, the body appears in swirls

such as “this yellow movement bursting forth like coltrane’s melodies all mouth/ buttocks moving like palm trees” (*IBW* 60). Sanchez collapses tropical undulation and the sprawling sound of John Coltrane with all the female curves that “buttocks” serves to suggest. Made of music, place, light and energy, this body has meaning beyond its superficial form.

The undulation suggests one of the primal, recurring actions in a Sanchez poem: walking. Like a proud woman’s strut, the poem evokes movement and tension in the sway of its verbs. Sanchez reinforces that sway, not only between subject and setting but amidst her range of emotions: is this a serene earthmother, this woman “whose body weaves desert patterns” as she continues to travel? Does the next line, describing her as “wet with wandering” mean that she is also bereft and fugitive (60)? We also have, in “raining rhythm of blue/black/ smiles”, a Sanchez-typical syntax operating even more ambiguously (60). The verb could connote the restorative languor of rain, as the woman savors those smiles. She could also be adrift amid their drumming intensity, possibly alone amidst a festive, oblivious crowd– or both. With the homophonic parallel of reign taken into account, satisfaction centers and elevates this figure. The verb in “carrying beneath her breasts/pleasures without tongues” is also an allusive one. Black women’s herstory of literal and figurative carrying (cotton, children, debt, secrets, other people’s children, and racial morality) compounds even their contemporary psychological acts and reactions (60). Is she carrying close to her heart what is most dear in a protective silence, or choked pains that remain invalidated by speech?

Sanchez’s language moves this black woman’s body and its meaning; the body is a complex site of emotions simultaneous and mixed– those of satisfaction so deep it is silent, or of stifled joy. Phrases like “melancholy woman forgotten/before memory came” indicate a bleak undertow below the surface of allusions to natural beauty (60). Yet, motion and the experiences it yields also emerge from place associations. These connect the speaker’s body to indigenous

sites as varied as the beauty of black women they reflect: the Caribbean and Africa, whether shoreline, desert, or rain forest.

The poem turns harsh amidst its beauty. The Edenic joys of the tropics cannot ease the hard knowledge this speaker finds weighing down the motions of her life: "there is no place [/] for a soft/black/woman" (60). With this line, speaker and reader arrive at an unanticipated new level of movement, for, despite its questing figure and ambiguity, who expects emotional destitution? Still, the poem does not stop here in defeat but continues to spin around the speaker as she reports on her search for a connected self. Let us consider the spiritual and emotional distance she must cover to find connection. Eventually, she generates a vision that elides boundaries of time: "i see my history/ standing like a shy child/and i chant lullabies/as i ride my past on horseback" (60-61). A rejuvenating spiritual connection occurs as her "grandmothers gathering/from [her] bones like great wooden birds/ spread their wings" (61). Now, she has been given even more exceptional powers of touch, and is able to "walk like a song round [her] waist" (61).

Metaphorically and practically, Sanchez connects this black female body to those of her speaker's ancient past. As a coping mechanism, she must generate a vision of herself in a cultural context larger and more encouraging than the constrained one in which she finds herself. With her body as the conduit, their experiences pass into renewed life. This restorative ancestral contact clarifies the speaker's perspective on her questing struggle for recognition and on the intersectionality of race and gender. It balances the persistent melancholy of contemporary experience she cites. Inevitably, it also recalibrates the speaker's self-regard. Reimagining herself in this way gives her present body a greater sense of power over, and movement through, those constraints. What does this act mean about black women? An answer might begin by suggesting that it indicates the presence of a boundless hunger and a perpetual determination. How does it speak to the depth of abuses that mark them, the urgency of their

desire for rescue and rejuvenation? I hold that the poem enacts a connection between black women's past and present urgency, desire, and also their will to survive. The poet also strives to indicate a collaboration of imagery and language that climbs above descriptive to expand a dialectic between words and action. Further, imagination and memory rise to a level of action here, enabling the speaker to move–even travel, in a sense– beyond her immediate physical conditions such that ultimately, she can take physical action.

At the poem's open-ended conclusion, the speaker is "walking. womb ripe. loud with mornings. walking. making pilgrimage to herself. walking." (61). Her journey brings her to this seemingly basic act. Because we tend to perceive walking as basic, simple and human, its potency as a healing measure becomes large. The importance of walking as a trope in Sanchez's work lies in that very fact. To locate its richness here as a connective act, we have only to realize its place in African-American history. Walking embodies the agency involved African-American escapes from enslavement and migrations within and beyond U.S. borders. Culturally, the idea of this non-mechanized, slower, more deliberate and body-conscious act also becomes a display of independence, status, and self-possession, as in the strolls cultivated by urban gangs. Walking joins the dual powers of the individual, interior will and outer propulsion. Walking connotes faith in its forward motion, connects the intangibles, past and future, by contact with the very tangible ground. Now that the speaker of "present" has faced the worst truth—her hopes for a place of acceptance and blossoming seem futile or out of reach– she must trust in her body. Its ability to rise in the morning, to move, to give birth to anything beautiful, must carry and restore her. These are the basic truths she receives from a lineage of black women who realize, before and alongside Lucille Clifton's words, that "every day something has tried to kill me/and has failed" (*BL* 25). Through the representation of a woman who continues walking toward fulfillment while admitting to difficulty, Sanchez writes on behalf of many black women and readers at large who seek to understand how their will survives.

As walking is central to "present," kneeling and singing are the primary connective acts of the short poem, "tanka," named for its form:

i kneel down like a
collector of jewels before
you. i am singing
one long necklace of love my
mouth a sapphire of grapes (*SL* 20).

Sanchez is a longtime practitioner of the tanka and has advanced its use among African-American poets. An ancient Japanese form intended to capture mood and concentrate imagery, it is reminiscent of the more familiar three-line haiku; however, the tanka extends contains five lines. The lines are organized in a syllabic pattern, using five, seven, and five on the first three lines, and seven syllables on each of the last two, although the Handbook of Poets Forms notes that poets writing in English often vary this pattern (Padgett 187). One of its traditional purposes, as a morning-after note sent from one lover to another, may explain why Sanchez has used it so frequently for love poems since the late 1960s. She has often celebrated its potential for linguistic power within an economic package. Many of her title-less tankas appear in collections across her career, including *Love Poems* (1973)*, I've Been A Woman* (1978)*, Under a Soprano Sky* (1987) and *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* (2002).

This poem is a taut record of arrival at a long-awaited destination. Its economic fit and bold, associative leaps from these verbs to sensory nouns, invokes reverie and devotion. Gesture tells of this pinnacle, this meeting that rewards the speaker's longing with a vision of satisfaction simultaneously physical and spiritual. The line "I kneel down" conjures an ancient pageantry, as of holiness, sparkling with symbolic meaning; the ongoing dazzle created by the present tense adds to its wonder. These qualities defy the assumption that kneeling is forced or blindly

submissive. We glean from the use of simile that while the speaker's gestures may suggest the sophisticated appreciation of a collector, she is driven to reverence by sexual desire.

Structurally and cognitively, the line "you. i am singing" forms a bond between the speaker and subject, both of whom are coated in the sensory experience of the song. Radiating from the singer's voice to the ears and skin of all listeners, singing enacts a physicality just short of actual contact. That wave of music supersedes the grammar that might have occurred on lines four and five but falls away to show us how completely the force of song and communion engulf the speaker. Thus, gesture extends to a deliberate tone throughout the lines and the ritualistic imagery rises to support that tone.

Sanchez brings an equivalent sense of action, and thus, the body, to the noun sapphire. Its image here parallels the startling beauty of the gem with that of openly surrendered love and sexual pleasure. Prone and glowing with satisfaction, the speaker's body and particularly her mouth, is a jewel central in an act of supreme offering that lights the poem. Its quick but full, unwavering imagery transforms the women, too. Compounding this image of sexuality are those of generosity, natural beauty, and life energy which, in the speaker's mouth, becomes fruit. We have a doubly connective act here: *within the poem,* the woman's fleshy mouth speaks of fulfillment on her own terms and describing itself as such; secondly, there is Sanchez's making of *the poem itself* as a gesture. It attaches a bold, self-defined image of passion to the public representation of black women. A redress of popular culture also lurks irresistibly here in Sanchez's re-appropriation of the word "sapphire," secondary though it is to the jeweled body. As colloquial African-American usage, the word connotes any brown-skinned working-class black female, following, perhaps, the "Amos 'N Andy" radio/television show of the 1950s. Sapphire's mouth–big-lipped, loud, hypercritical and derisive toward men—signifies an updated caricature of such women as harsh and unwomanly. This image is rebuffed by the joyful moves

of "tanka." With the two precise verbs employed in this very short poem, Sanchez binds the hegemonically-enforced rift between black female bodies and personal fulfillment.

This effort to name black women's bodies as loveable tends to appear among Sanchez's "song" poems, wherein the actions and gestures of black women speakers and subjects convey the value of touch, sometimes by expressing the absence of it. One example, "song no. 3," first appears in *Under A Soprano Sky* (1987). This matter of Sanchez and her songs will enter the discussion later; for now, a relevant contextual point is that, like "tanka," the poem itself acts connectively, putting Sanchez in conversation with a thread of literary predecessors. Sanchez's would-be mentor and elder, Gwendolyn Brooks, follows Charles Chestnutt, Nella Larsen, Wallace Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston in opening African-American color consciousness to critique.[vii] In the spirit of Brooks' "The Life of Lincoln West, Sanchez takes on the rarely-addressed issue of a child's vulnerability to skin-color bias. More immediately, however, "song no. 3" positions a subject that is explicitly or implicitly black and female, and through gesture, she expresses regard for her own self-hood.

In "song no. 3 (for 2nd and 3rd grade sisters)," a bleak poem more notable for its treatment of subject than its craft, Sanchez shows her speaker idly sitting, hopping and perhaps stumbling around on a sidewalk. We might imagine this speaker as metonym for many a black elementary school-aged girl, leaning sideways or hunched over. These gestures reveal that she is lonely, with no comfort greater than herself and her invented games. She seems to wait aimlessly for some more engaging presence than her own. However, this solitary figure keeps her own counsel; she privileges the reader with first-person revelations. As the speaker thinks, she talks to herself. She also continues to play, alone. Sanchez uses her speech and demonstrations of solitude to illuminate a communion within herself and a capacity to dream.

The speaker introduces herself in blunt terms that name her body as a sign of deficiency. She is "short, black, and skinny", three adjectives forming a spare sketch of the speaker that

position her body as the outside world perceives it. There, it equates with "ugly," which her assertion that "cain't nobody tell [her] any different" makes clear (*USS* 53). She lives with an understanding that skin color names her body as doomed. Her resigned tone establishes this status. The names incurred so consistently by her dark skin and inscribed so indelibly upon it open her to raw psychological pain and isolation. The imagery of her solitary play, which she seeks out no companions to relieve, sharpens it.

From oppressive perspectives, the speaker's body is her burden, and she also alludes to this sorry view. Yet, the poem uses subtle emphasis on this exterior view to allude to a more assured, private sense of self. Talk links her to that assurance, giving her grounds on which to build her own private view of circumstances and to make independent choices. Even her harsh confrontation, once it repeats in stanza five– "i'm ugly anybody with sense can see" –begins to seem important as a superficial realization that protects her interior (53). The statement gains resilience for this girl because she faces and speaks it within this realm of communion, or what Collins would call a "safe space" (101). The observation carries a hint of irony, since the outside world has taught her to shield her true feelings. The speaker talks her way toward the idea that she is not fixed by this outward assessment of her looks.

Protective speech builds her resilience and powers of observation. Thus, the line "i jump the sidewalk cracks knowin i cain't fall" can be read as an act that expresses faith in her ability to counter expectations (53). In other words, if this is a child who knows the world has deemed her undesirable, invisible, and so relegated to its "cracks" that she cannot fall lower, it is conceivable that she can only rise. In jumping over the cracks where she is expected to remain, she cultivates resistance to the world's dismissal. Isolation, therefore, is also an ironic gift. Sitting alone and playing alone enables her imagination and brings about a sort of communion with her body. By the poem's end, it seems that that intimacy produces her turn toward an optimistic regard of herself and future. Again, sight comes into play as an act connecting her inner gaze

with those external perceptions so different from her own. Hope remains that she might also receive a measure of visual recognition by seeing herself reflected in the eyes of "somebody" whose words will single her out positively "and say/looka here. a pretty little black girl lookin' just like me" (53).

The hope that hums quietly below "song no. 3" breaks and scatters in "poem no. 3". Love and affirmation is behind this speaker, whose desolation unhinges the present and clouds her future:

> i gather up
> each sound you left behind
> and stretch them
> on our bed.
> each nite
> i breathe you
> and become high. (*SL* 10)

Written in the brief Afro-Modernist styling common to her early BAM-period work, the poem is typical of Sanchez in its short, lyric nature, focus on sensory elements, and verbs that render the poem's subtext in deft strokes. The use of "gather", "stretch", and "breathe", especially in synesthetic ways also common to Sanchez, serve this discussion as definitive motions by the speaker. All three signify efforts to sustain connection between her mind, body, and spirit in the midst of loss.

In the speaker's gathering, she strives to reassemble and continue contact with the feelings of a world defined by a powerfully tangible love. Sanchez is a poet ever conscious of the difficult edges; thus, the importance the speaker attaches to every nuance– action, gestures, and senses, specifically sound–indicates the power of this now-broken relationship. So too, they mark its absence and contribute to her memory. Gathering, in a domestic context as occurs

here, connotes holding objects close to the body, in the arms or hands. As the poem opens with the image of the speaker clutching dissipated sounds, Sanchez shows us how desperately she needs even this intangible aspect of love to give her body purpose.

What she has inside, she now needs to do tangible work as well, knowing there will be no replenishing of the love energy she needs to keep herself going. To amplify the memory she needs to carry on, the speaker resorts to a surreal action. She must stretch the intangible beyond itself, reshaping past joy to help her connect each day to the next across the lover's gaping absence. It is significant that the act of stretching aligns with the bed, a locus of intimate contact in a relationship. Normally she might stretch sheets and quilts for shared comfort and warmth, whereas now, the bed represents emotional torture. When sound replaces the tactile covering of the bedclothes or the lover for this distraught speaker, through this signature Sanchez verb– "stretch," she stretches out not for rest or sex but to rejoin what the bed offers now: part delirium, through loss, and part revival, through memory. Now that the speaker is alone in the bed, her memory must work harder, swaddling her mind and body to maintain contact between them.

The richly allusive act of breathing binds this woman's mind and body to her spirit. Life-sustaining breath connects her living immediately with love. The synesthetic and grammatical immediacy of "i breathe you" enacts the speaker's intensified need for union with the subject, such that love is barely subordinate to survival. As we know the woman has been "left behind," we know that life-giving breath might bring her to new possibilities. What it more certainly does, in her grief, is link her to the sad irony of a ritual that she performs "each nite" (10). It is doubly ironic that as the speaker inhales, she seems closer to succumbing. An enduring idea for Sanchez is that in order to progress, we must actually survive first. This may explain why breathing and breath are a frequent trope of the body in her work. Perhaps, here and in other

poems, her intention is a connective one, aimed at linking our fundamental gift, our center, with our possibilities.

Finally, the breath carries the speaker back into memory so intensely that it allows her to "become high" (10). Whether intoxicated by her urgent scraps of sound, the recollection of orgasmic joy that likely occurred in that same bed, or by a drug-induced effort to float above pain, this mournful breathing is the only kind that connects her with feeling—past, present, or both. Through breathing, her high joins her to an altered, but not exalted, state. Although some ambiguity exists as to whether the speaker's ritual is more that of pot smoker or addict than lost lover, this is not likely a giddy or assertive high. There is no sense of triumph or deliverance from her nightly submersion. The structure, stark tone, and closing punctuation lean toward emotional drift, suggesting that she ingests as much despair as air through the reductive cycle of these three actions.

Sanchez also offers greater ambiguity in the representation of a black woman's body. Here are motions with links to housekeeping: the speaker gathers up, she tends to a bed shared with a lover. A barely-acknowledged domestic backdrop, long synonymous with black women, hangs in this context. Yet, the house in question remains that of her body, wide open to grief. When have we witnessed a black woman's world in this way, with such acts imbued with personal meaning? Sanchez strives here to indicate what transpires behind the fiction of the strong black woman. Ultimately (and sadly, it requires stating), the poem informs us that black women are living human beings: as such, we cannot always cope. In the midst of lives we must keep living, the fact is, we continue breathing, even in grief. Our herstory often shows us that we have kept standing when loss and defeat hit us full on. Yet these responses may come as much from an apparent shortage of options and a surplus of conditioning to resourcefulness as from strength. What becomes ironic is that this reaction to grief, even when acknowledged by others,

is plowed back into the stereotyped invincibility which mainstream culture has used to justify black women's ongoing exploitation.

The emphasis on motion and gesture Sanchez brings to bear on these poems centers black women's bodies in emotional contexts that too often go unrecognized. For women whose bodies have historically been owned by others, what these bodies express in text is significant. As in "present" and "song no. 3," black women's awareness of the position that race and gender inscribe on them informs and resonates through their actions. By writing from a consciousness of this positionality, Sanchez imbues apparently simple acts with self-regard and intensely-felt extremes such as "tanka" and "poem no. 3" illustrate. Desire, struggle, satisfaction—these terms connect more strongly to black women's perspectives and experiences because of Sanchez's work. Sanchez's naming through action also informs the voicing of black women's relationships to themselves, others, and the cultures they inhabit.

Orality and Vernacular: A Cultural Naming

Craft bears great relationship to the contexts, poetics, motives, and outcomes of Sanchez's writing practices. To make specific alliances between content and craft, Sanchez evokes particular types of language that works to represent black women in poems. Thus, when settings are apparent, her poems may reference places where black women might find and hear themselves. Her speakers often employ points of view and make references readily recognizable in communities, where black folk live, even across class lines. Regarding diction, there is less consistency; Sanchez ranges from elegant and formal to colloquial. This is true consistently, although in her early work, she accedes that her choices were "sometimes sharp, acerbic. You slap people," she says, to draw attention. "At some point you say, 'There's another way to do it.' Maybe you say something beautiful or coming from a point of love, and…grab people that way" (*Conversations* 85-86).

Critics have been slow to accommodate her shifts. Perceptions of the profanity that helped bring her notoriety persist long after critic Arthur P. Davis charged (and later recanted) that the "new poetry…deals in hate", long after the poet has changed her approach (147). Writing in 2003, Elizabeth Frost generalizes "rage" as a feature of her "poetic form and idiom" (65). As recently as 2005, Cheryl Clarke, in *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement,* discusses Sanchez as a wielder of vitriolic rhetoric that upheld BAM's tenets if not its masculinist tendencies (52). In fact, I venture that even when upping the ante on profanity by attempting to exhaust it –as in "TCB" which chants variations of "wite/motha/fucka" 18 times— she carries that mantle more thoroughly and lastingly than any other BAM woman poet, including Nikki Giovanni (*WBP* 59). None of that negates the expressions of endurance, despair, pleasure, alienation, and other nuances known to black women that she does reveal over a longer time. Sanchez understands herself within African-American literary traditions (and diasporic, post-colonial, and world traditions as well), changing over time (*Conversations* 145). Orality, therefore, in her poems is affirmation on two levels: it upholds a multicultural literary practice and also for our purposes, black women as speakers, subjects, and reader/listeners.

To be clear, by orality I mean the "secondary orality" Ong describes, wherein technologies that support writing and print sustain the practices and qualities of spoken language *(11)*. Partnered with this is a type that Sanchez has cultivated through her own experiments with sound and adaptations of form. She integrates this aspect into a performative style that distinguishes her voicing of black women's concerns among African-American poets. This is a politically liberating action on Sanchez's part, in keeping with the BAM's mission of affirming black expressive culture and constructing new forms to empower it. This political stance colors her aesthetic position as well, one which finds it necessary to sustain and reinvigorate African-American poetry through a combination of adaptation and experiment, to

"make connections toward human actions,…to make connections with the world" (*Conversations* 188).

Orality in this discussion also rests on some exceedingly valuable concepts related to African-American language and poetry by black women. Each shows, in its particular way, how Sanchez thoroughly embeds the orality of naming black women's bodies and voices in an African-American cultural context. Hers is a black feminist approach, even a mission: through creative practice, Sanchez emphasizes the need women in the BAM had to express a new vision of Blackness. In specific terms, a manifestation of Stephen E. Henderson's critical view that themes "[cluster] in Black poetry around . . . the idea of Liberation" (13) unfolds– whether public, private, individual, collective, or some combination of these. The vision, for many BAM women poets, also incorporates gender-based particulars that had often gone unsaid in their lives. In other words, orality as Sanchez displays it endorses the combined positionality of race and gender that black male nationalists and white feminists have had such difficulty acknowledging.

A discussion of orality is also critical to insuring more clarity about Sanchez's deliberate participation in what Fahamisha Patricia Brown describes as "African-American vernacular culture", and the "written orality" (28) which it includes. In this culture, "[a] written text can function as a call", and thus, "ways of speaking, intoning, and singing words lurk within the forms of African-American poetry" (29). Sanchez reveals that she and other BAM poets wished to prove that "this language that…the masses spoke…should be considered poetic. Just as Sterling Brown took the language of workers and Black folks" (*Conversations* 178). Grounded as she is in a variety of working-class and regional vernaculars, musical influences, and cultural practices including storytelling, Sanchez seems to share Ong's view that "Writing can never dispense with orality" (8). Rather, she demonstrates concern with how writing enhances it. With black women's bodies and experiences serving as the content, Sanchez's application of

such conscious orality to the sounding of her poems creates another means of recognition and naming of those women.

Henderson *Understands the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* published in 1973, establishes a substantive critical foundation for reading Sanchez, and a broader appreciation for the literary and cultural merits of BAM poetry at large. Had Henderson lived to engage in the age of expanded African-American literary criticism, the conversation and contention of that period might have evolved differently. More recent critics, writing from Afro-Modernist, Black cultural studies, and black feminist epistemologies, who have undertaken aspects of that work–Lorenzo Thomas, Aldon Nielsen, Geneva Smitherman, and Cheryl Clarke, for instance, bridge Henderson's initiatives with contemporary BAM scholarship. Written during the active BAM period, Henderson's study strives to bring sharper analysis to nationalistic efforts by Neal and Addison Gayle to formulate and codify criteria that could be termed a Black Aesthetic. Henderson also locates important literary innovation as well as cultural continuity in BAM poetry. His work acknowledges the limitations in BAM –era constructions of Blackness, yet also directs a balanced commitment toward the validity of terms like "soul" as an article of "the Black Experience" (62). Henderson acknowledges the fallibility of this latter term although he stands by it, with a qualifier that it is a "phenomenon" used "for the sake of convenience" (62). Read within context, however, his analysis reflects a more starkly polarized period in African-American literary production and criticism; ultimately, this fact does not diminish his framing of African-American poetry within a cultural matrix of orality, so useful for treating Sanchez's contribution.

Henderson's analysis of "Black speech and music as poetic reference" derives from a recognition that African-Americans have inherited, adapted, and thereby sustained a vibrant, cross-fertilizing "wholeness" of "oral and written" culture (31, 3). This culture springs from the African belief in Nommo, a life-force that comes through the word, which endures in and is

transformed by the African-American experience. Born of this fusion, African-American orality remains a cultural imperative and practice– spontaneous and improvisational, yet equally intentional and precise. African-American orality operates in a keenly aware, socio-political dialectic of oppression and resistance to it, spawned by the histories of colonialism in the Americas. This consciousness, in the hands of black poets, subsequently shapes "the Black Experience" as literary art (62).

Henderson's emphasis on alliances between speech, music, and poetry divides into three inter-related points of analysis, and his insistence on their linkage indicates his affinity for BAM's position on the political role of art forms: he finds the more objective points of "theme" and "structure" inextricable from a far more subjective term he describes as "saturation", or a "sense of fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the Black Experience" (62). Accordingly, the Sanchez poems discussed here engage in a conscious harmony with these three points, if not a neatly consistent parallel. However malleable and expandable the "Black Experience" might be, it requires voices to energize and specify those "observed and intuited truth[s]" (62). Sanchez's engagement, then, with black women's voices and speech activates saturation as a base for understanding her approach to orality here, and also later, with regard to form.

A reasonable question that furthers the discussion is how does orality complement, and even contribute to, the representation of black women's bodies and herstories through Sanchez's poems? Sanchez bears out Henderson's claim that black poets who reflect these influences poetically adapt and privilege a range of performative black speech acts. Diction and tone are two aspects already intrinsic to orality. Sanchez uses them in her work to indicate concern that black women's voices be recognized. We have a line such as "baby. / … /it ain't like they say /in the newspapers" (*SL* 3) from the female speaker of "homecoming", the title poem of her first book. On its own, this line is saturated with three centuries of African-American history and folk culture, urban and rural. Its written expression sustains an oral quality inflected with

experience-based wisdom. This wisdom lies in the impulse to readily question the validity of newspaper accounts as supposedly objective sources, knowing that people of color experience routine bias there. This line indicates the sort of wisdom that Patricia Hill Collins differentiates from knowledge. Lines like these help to crystallize Henderson's term, saturation, as a "*depth* and *quality* of experience" (64)—even if the same innate connection to this language will not spring up in every reader, black or not.

Sanchez's approach to black vernacular has also distinguished her linguistic performance. As preface to this point, I am reminded of Aldon Nielsen's caution that scholars too often assume a singular vernacular operates among black writers (9). Indeed, this idea of cultural naming is limited and somewhat general; it does not intend to overlook the fact that within African-American culture, differences in class, sexuality, and region would likely generate other analyses. And yet, I contend that because African-American culture has grown from and operated within a concern for survival, few within it remain entirely ignorant of its general linguistic flow. Here, I want to distinguish what I choose to call a transmigrational black vernacular— one that cuts across the language styles produced by the Great Migration. It merges rural southern and urban northern idioms. Usage varies according to regional origin and destination of migrant groups. Still, Sanchez seems on the verge of acknowledging this merger and authorizing my term in explaining that the "northern, urban language that many of us were using…was similar to Black southern speech, but it had a different kind of rhythm, urgency,… a different way of looking at the world" (*Conversations* 178). This combination of vernacular styles reflects the experience of a multi- generational group of black urbanites whose roots, relatives, and cultural norms are southern. They are, so to speak, raised in both places and fluent in both languages. Transmigrational vernacular appears especially in Sanchez's earliest books, from *homecoming* (1969) through *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (1984). This mix is but one facet of Sanchez's language work, as she is one to expand and continue experimenting.

A sign of southern-ness that marks her style is the frequent replacement of 'your' with 'yo'. An example appears in the diction and syntax of "towhomitmayconcern": "ima gonna tattoo me on you fo ever/ leave my creases all inside yo creases/ i done warned ya boy" (*SL* 71). This usage invokes a sense of cultural authority; this is the voice of the folk, from which subsequent generations have migrated, yet which retains an unvarnished grip on what Henderson calls the "soul" level, a place where "that unique cluster of forces, events, personalities, and sensibility" which "Black people feel is their distinctiveness" comes together (74, 68). This is a voice that black preachers save for the second half of the sermon, the voice that reaches across distance with an undying grip; for some of us it is an ancestral voice. By contrast, the flavor of northern, urban, jazz-influenced speech commonly appears in a different kind of casual language when speakers use the word 'yeah' and/or address their subjects as 'man'. These words, especially when punctuated with periods, carry blunt irony, clipped introversion and a skepticism that can be read as an oral construction of detachment and 'cool'. "Past", another section from her autobiographical series first published in 1973, turns to urban vernacular to describe a scene from girlhood:

> parties
> where we'd grinddddDDDD
> and grinddddDDDDD
> but not too close
> cuz if you gave it up
> everybody would know. and tell. (*IBW* 59)

Sanchez's typographical signature on the physical contact between teenagers "slow-dragging" at a basement party cannot be ignored. It brings sound and sense to the poem with the serious playfulness of vernacular. Her consonant string replicates the hypnotic escalation of body contact and the moment sustained by a long-held note. This typography enhances an already distinct vernacular emphasis, pacing, and authority of the speaker, in which the phrase "gave it up" is saturated. The phrase directs itself to a common parlance among black people, and most particularly black women, even if all will not hear the same nuances in it. With this

phrase, the poet seeks to connect a very specific audience to the precarious nature of black girl subjectivity. It carries cultural resonances related to their representation as sexual beings, less in the world at large, than within the immediate, formative realms of family and community morality. It speaks not *about*, but *to* a post-migration African-American culture and *to* a place, time, and experience in which black female sexuality was something to be guarded, handled cautiously, and quite consciously separated from mainstream Jezebel notions. These notions underscore the tension of the grind's high risk, life-changing association with sexuality and pregnancy for a group with few resources to assure successful lives.

Vernacular speech often frames the storytelling in Sanchez's much-overlooked prose poems. One which first appears in *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987), "style no. 1" relates an actual incident involving the poet. This fact doubles the poem's emotional power. Fused in the speaker's voice are the subject's personal validation that accompanies her testimony and the dramatization that sustains the storytelling aspect:

> night wind at my back, dressed in my finest. black
> cashmere coat caressing the rim of my gray suede boots. hat sitting
> acey duecy. anointing the avenue with my black smell.
> and this old dude. red as his car inching its way on the sidewalk.
> honked his horn. slid his body almost out of his skin. toward me
> psst. psst. hey. let's you and me have some fun....
> and he pulled his penis out of his pants...a
> memory of Saturday afternoon moviehouses where knowledge
> comes with a tremulous cry. old white men. spiderlike. spinning
> their webs towards young girls legs (*USS* 91)

Further, the cultural power and range of tonal gestures embedded in this black vernacular speech, evokes the emotional transformation of this assured woman speaker whose private moments of satisfaction at attaining a beautiful confidence and setting out to enjoy her self-possession are spoiled. Once interrupted, she crosses into an ugly memory of sexual danger, vulnerability, and anger. The voice directs this shift from comfort to the discomfort of black women's ongoing experience with sexual misrepresentation, commodification, and the assaults that these conditions encourage.

By tapping into those inferences, Sanchez makes "style no. 1" a collective testimony. This story goes beyond her, a demonstration of the "interconnectedness between art and people's lives" that Joyce A. Joyce describes in linking Sanchez's practice to African poetry (xiv). One "cultural need" Joyce might see in "style no. 1" that relates to black women is the need to verbalize their herstories of exploitation so replete with the sort of encounter Sanchez brings forward. Sexual solicitation is an experience that is inevitably universal—even for men. However, if we can imagine "style no. 1" as an Afro-Modernist folktale, the poem's shape and voicing can be particularized to black women's centuries-old battle against rape. When Barbara Christian credits black women writers with "transforming the content of their own communities' views on the nature of women", she inadvertently names Sanchez also, even though novelists are her focus (qtd. in Hernton 152). Sanchez uses her experience deftly, tying its meaning to a pivotal moment when a primal memory, an ancestral figure, and response coalesce: "and i saw mama Dixon…big [/] loud friend of the family…and i [/] greased my words on her tongue… [/] motha fucka…ask yo mama [/] to skin you. that is if you ever had one cuz anybody ugly as you [/] couldna been born" (*USS* 91).

In applying sophisticated, nuanced language, the curse-swollen dozens, or something in between, Sanchez has the facility to saturate the poems with diction that meets the speaker in her moment. Her range enhances the transformative power to which Christian refers, as the

various poems reach out into a culture that prizes multiple expressions of "beautiful talk" (Henderson 33).

Henderson's idea of descriptive enumeration as a criterion of black poetry operates in "style no. 1" through Sanchez's Afro- modernist syntactic style. Her sentence fragments create a fractured, imagistic list that unfolds in the minds of speaker and reader. They unhinge the immediate incident and make it surreal. Their arrangement elides past and present as the poem's subjects spin into a world created by the sexual exploitation of black females. Sanchez has perspective on this incident, and the form bears out her role as a situated knower. this world of impending threat is also a bizarre, fractured one, which they have long inhabited and been forced to understand.

Oral Afro-Modernism enters into this discussion, clarifying the contributions that Sanchez brings to performative speech through versatility, concrete dimensions and models. Lorenzo Thomas distinguishes vernacular as used by Sanchez and other BAM poets from predecessors, notably Dunbar, in a useful way by asserting that "Black Arts poets were, in fact, attempting to find the 'race soul' and set it to singing" (215). Thomas's comment resonates with Henderson's concept of soul as a fluid "distinctiveness" of Blackness which privileges black people's definitions of their experiences. He implies that this "race soul" was missing until the BAM period, although he may mean that it was largely unexpressed as such. Thomas's statement comes informed by his own participation as an innovative poet, observer within, and critic of the BAM. Still, it is vital to point out that his perception here is not as singular or essentialist as it sounds. More likely, 'race soul' refers to a cultural existence wherein the terms under for writing vernacular changed. Dunbar's mode was understood as primarily sentimental and nonthreatening for a nonblack audience, and a humanizing of the rural and migrant urban African-American experiences he captured. Black writing had been enormously stifled and limited to few mass outlets. The BAM challenged this perception of vernacular and triggered a

proliferation of black texts. Thus, Thomas leans toward recognizing the development, by Sanchez and contemporaries, of a potent political art within the suppressed innovations of performative black speech.

Thomas shares this acknowledgement with Mike Sell, who reads Sanchez's orality through a lens of avant-garde performance studies. Sell has written thoughtfully about the BAM as a "Performance Movement" (228). He lists a compendium of far-reaching aesthetic, political, and philosophical influences– from the avant-garde and Leftist politics to "ethnographic narrative" and African-American performers– on how Sanchez and her counterparts made art (229-230). Sell emphasizes the BAM's advance of Blackness as "inseparable from specific cultural contexts and performative gestures", citing the theoretical work of Neal, along with poet-editor Etheridge Knight, playwright Charles Fuller, and critic Jimmy Stewart (230). Sell understands Blackness as "an ethos", a complex performance rather than a reductive formula, which advances my claim about the power of Sanchez's versatile diction to complicate, yet clarify, black women's lives. Blackness, he finds, is "a flexible, site-specific dynamic of knowing and doing" (230). That definition could also characterize the vernacular speech we examine here. Given these forces, the already oppositional dynamics of black speech with regard to standardized English, and the unrestrained climate in which BAM develops, Sanchez's invocation of "singing" –a black feminist soul at that– is bound to slip conventional bounds in its performance of resistance. Certainly, a song as postmodern and deconstructive as Coltrane's rendition of "My Favorite Things" could be in the making. When this context applies to the even further suppressed experiences of black women, we can imagine the poet seeks, in her expanded performative speech, a cultural naming of black women that fits the resistant, deconstructive world they know.

In other words, Sanchez's approach to orality is always performative–in line with the traditions Henderson and Smitherman have detailed–but not always strictly vernacular. She

uses transmigrational vernacular to help avoid that artifice which Neal theorized as part of a "dying" aesthetic ("Black Arts Movement" 59). However, Sanchez takes varying paths in her construction of a contemporary black poetic diction that diverges abruptly from Western notions of poetry. Thomas's observation that "[a]t work in the Black Arts Movement …was an extension of Langston Hughes's Modernist idiom and a similarly Modernist determination to avoid the clumsy artifice of traditional 'poetic diction'" grounds Sanchez's linguistic choices in a larger context (215). Hughes sought, in his diction, to preserve the voice and being of the black inhabitants of pavements, bar stools, and barbershops. Sanchez fuses their imagination and song in two ways inspired by Afro-Modernist influences. She creates innovative juxtapositions of language that combine the surprise of jazz and the figurative performance of black vernacular.

Aligned with Henderson's criteria of imagery that is "hyperbolic," we can point to the performative nature of Sanchez's highly figurative turns (38). For example, Sanchez's love tanka, discussed above, possesses a slim, but bright, strand of connection to the African-American tradition of the boastful toast. The image of a speaker able to distill, through singing, such love that it transforms, draping the beloved and the lover, becoming a necklace, makes a fantastic assertion in one deft stroke. The love, the song, the speaker, and the lover are all implicated as powerful participants. Although the subtext of toasts generally involve claims to power, the context, subject matter, diction, and form of "tanka" take it far from the original concept. While the claim made in Sanchez's tanka is overlaid with humility and devotion, the expansive metaphor it offers resonates with the hyperbolic black speech which energizes toasts and supports Henderson's theory. Certainly, though, this poem is no extension of the conventional version of the tradition. I am arguing for it as an improvised toast. This, however, is only one of the ways Sanchez seems to carry forward the dictum of the BAM that Larry Neal defined as an overturning of Europeanized western culture's bankrupt ideals (62-63); she presents the 'new wine' of black women's actual (as opposed to that imagined and imposed)

sexual desire in the unexpected 'old bottle' of an ancient Japanese form. Yet the purpose of this form, which has been noted, is appropriate, and its origin demonstrates the search among BAM poets for non-Western approaches to making art.

Another example in this category comes from a poem (treated more thoroughly below) in which Sanchez's elegiac imagining of Shirley Graham DuBois's death "demands a capsizing of tides," writing that DuBois "hung [her] breasts on pagodas" (*IBW* 100). The hyperbole is such that it lifts our imaginations and, like an aerial view of the familiar, makes complex and surreal that which we might have limited to flat, factual terms. Simultaneously in this effort we experience Sanchez as cultural worker, extending African-American vernacular tradition, and artist, who shows us how performative hyperbole explodes the mundane through description, as when "pilgrim waves whistle complaints to man" (SL 25) in the above elegy. Among other examples, abundant across decades of work, there is "I Have Walked a Long Time", a rarely-discussed lyric poem which returns us to that Sanchez-enriched act of walking. It begins, "i have walked a long time/ much longer than death that splinters/ wid her innuendos" (*SL* 47).

To cite "innuendos" as death's device is performative on two levels: the phrase renders harsh conditions using marvelous, signifying language, and the poem becomes a moment, as its language startles, involves, and enlarges the reader/listener's sensory awareness. That is a move no more expected by the reader than is her description of youth as the "wild geo /graphies of the /flesh" (*WBP* 21) in "personal letter no. 3," an early (1970) and unsung indicator of Sanchez's capacity for performative speech. Moreover, "[d]iscursive meaning and phonic density," qualities Kimberly Benston applies to another Sanchez poem, are also "inextricable" here, making "point of view and cultural literacy…central concerns of the poem" (158).

Some of the ways Sanchez does saturation, then, are through appropriation and improvisation, two aspects of "Black Experience." Sanchez keeps black women's bodies, voices,

and actions evident in the ongoing reinvigoration of those traditions which have always included their experiences with the deployment of orality.

"[T]he [S]oul [C]atalogues [E]ach [S]tep": Voices in Testimony[viii]

The word testimony conjures in me an impression of oral performance, one that demands a fusion of body and voice for the singular performer. The body is in full view. The voice must rise to represent the body's knowledge and cannot hide within it. This much holds true, whether the testifier reports an event from the witness stand, or relates a deeply personal path to spiritual realization, such as the 'testifyin' typical of African-American churches. Testimony to and about one's soul-charged experience provokes affirming praise of what one has survived. Alternately, this may also be the ground where speakers give voice, possibly in condemnation, to what has threatened their survival. In either case, an explication of conditions, interior and exterior, takes place. Testifying is a call that depends on response. It characterizes the voice emerging from spiritual wilderness and remembering its trials. In tone, it may be vulnerable or steely, fluid or unequivocal. In any case, testimony commits to recognizing and commanding respect for an ontology of physical and spiritual triumph or salvation.

Sanchez writes a range of poems I find reasonable to discuss as evidence of both types of testimony, a type that does not ignore the body but amplifies black women's voices as the body's representative. For readers and listeners, a poem producing this encounter with voice is as close as we are likely to come to understanding experiences we may or may not know directly. Even though the potent and specific herstory of black women is often inscribed on their bodies, we need the beautiful particulars that Sanchez's poems of testimony contribute. We also need the direct humanity and intimacy of the first-person voice.

"Just as testimony details how the saved convert 'got ovah' Jordan from sin to grace or salvation," Fahamisha Patricia Brown writes in her valuable testament to Henderson's scholarship, *Performing the Word: African American Poetry as Vernacular Culture, "*the

African American poet testifies to the experiences that have enabled her or him to cross over to survival, triumph, or transcendence…[I]n the convergence of the individual testifying voice and the communal witnessing reader/congregation…orality is rendered literary" (Brown 43). With the survival that Brown describes driving such poems, comes our exposure as readers or listeners to the speaker's moments of reckoning. However, Brown's point about the shared experience of testimony among individual and collective voices should not be lost. In a sermonic context, what "the old-time preacher…gave," Arna Bontemps explains, when the "church folk answered him back…affirmative[ly]", was "hope, confidence, a will to survive" (xiii). The "experiences" that Brown identifies touch the speaker and the listeners. The possibility of any catharsis exists for both parties.

Testimony, then, is social and dialogic. It works to establish or reiterate harmony, reciprocal relationships, common struggles and common values, according to linguist Geneva Smitherman; her concept of black modes of discourse also follows, yet enlarges, Henderson's work. That discourse includes usage styles apparent in Sanchez poems, including call and response in the "stating" and "counterstating" of conditions and ideas (118). These features she theorizes within a "Black communication system" that remains linked to an African worldview of "fundamental unity between the spiritual and material aspects of existence," and these qualities appear within various African-American traditions, including the work song, sermon, and folktale (74-75, 92-109). Thus, Sanchez enhances the subjectivity of readers/listeners and those about whom she writes; she call this "the theory of life" (*Conversations* 189)—a belief that when "words are humanized…literature makes us better human beings" (188).

Such "humanized" words constitute "song no. 2," wherein testimony makes a claim for the intrinsic worth of young women. Urgent and brisk, the poem's more overt efforts caution women to survive domination by identifying its patriarchal behaviors—in men and in themselves. In the hope of touching the spirits of "young girls waiting to live," the speaker

delineates the dangers they are likely to meet (*USS* 80). This apparently older and wiser speaker leans close to her subjects to warn, "don't let them kill you with their stare/ don't let them closet you with no air" (80). In writing about thematic directions taken by black women poets, Brown cites one of their purposes as the "call to arms" (107). This poem qualifies as such, if we consider that these young girls are being summoned to psychological readiness for a battle with patriarchal ideas. Implicit in its cautionary notes, however, is the speaker's own painful journey. Moving to the surface by way of "indirection," which makes use of "suggestion and innuendo" (Smitherman 97) are the intertwined accounts of a community, the generations of women whose desires did not survive. The speaker invokes these events and behaviors, which she or they may well have witnessed, to establish a common bond with the audience.

Structurally, repetition is an aspect of this poem that amplifies the sound and emotional texture of situated Black female knowledge. An imperative syntax also contributes to this very particular sense: each stanza is anaphoric, beginning with either "i say" or "don't let them" (73-74). The poem carries itself like church testimony. Rounds of repetition wind the refrain as an indicator of growing vocal intensity and pitch: "don't let them bleed you till you broke/ don't let them blind you in masculine smoke" (*SL* 74). Its rhythmic cadence and rhyme invites the audience to say 'amen'. Perhaps she also directs subliminal testimony, urging action and hope, to the adults and community surrounding the young people.

Through structure and language, she grazes young females with an experienced set of eyes, centralizes their bodies. She stands as witness to what she sees at present and knows of the future, offering them an account of their own vulnerability: "thinkin you won't, but you will" (73). She can also attest to their degradation –"molested at ten"—and recovery– "rising from the dead" (80). Sanchez's use of present tense underscores this message: black women already *are* entirely valuable, and exceptional; their worth does not need proving. She counteracts the immediate seductions that could deter them, reiterating measures of community healing: "we're

rising from the dead" and "we're dancing on our heads", acts that urge their power and self-confidence sooner than later (80). By virtue of its form, the tradition it follows, and its inclusive language, the poem interacts with its audience.

The testimony comes from a rigorous exhorter; we can imagine her blasting the poem from a loudspeaker on the back of a truck. She offers nothing less than love as armor and unshakeable faith for her women subjects. This urgency also suggests the speaker's own anger and fear. An aggressive anger in the repeating line, "i say. step back world. can't let it all go unsaid", pushes back with the knowledge that women's subjectivity has been systematically crushed (80). Fearing that ignorance will perpetuate the system, she names the two-fold dangers: the external threats from the world of men who will take these women, often already abused, for granted and those from the women who will let it happen. Her fear that the cycle will continue, that more women will fall prey rather than rise explains the urgency of her call for to a self-loving defense for women. In this way, her testimony takes up the threats she has known and directs these scenarios to the heart and spirit of the audience, as a sermon does. The reader/listener's reciprocal act is to receive this emotional charge and allow change to occur.

An early example of testimony that turns on a more singular voice and diction is "summer words for a sister addict". Through the 1970s, this poem has a long-standing place in Sanchez's public readings and was recorded several times. It brings Sanchez notice also for its stark openness about, and sensitivity to, drug addiction. Rather than provide a graphic depiction or pathological analysis of 'inner city' problems, Sanchez relates the very human story of one addict. More to the point, the addict is a very young black woman. Sanchez captures her voice immediately as the foremost feature of this startling poem with a confession: "the first day i shot dope/ was on a sunday" (*IBW* 23). The opening revelation that this is a young black girl at risk is only the base of the gravity. The diction emphasizes her trials, immediate and impending. She explains her drug use as a reaction to her mother's anger. Whether she is chubby or slender

or sassy or awkward, her report that "it felt good./gooder than doing it" reveals how young and/or immature she is (23). She seems unable to grasp the danger of drugs or sex as a gateway to disease and pregnancy. These thoughts either do not occur, or pleasure trumps them.

Revelation enters the poem unexpectedly with an interrogating voice. A narrating speaker introduces this voice, as if an onstage monologue under a single spotlight has given way to a therapeutic support circle: "sistuh.[/] did u [/] finally [/] learn how to hold yo/ mother?" (*IBW* 23). This measured, perceptive intervention breaks the young "sistuh" into tears and out of isolation; in its final stroke—"and we all sing"—she has the embrace of music and community (23). By ending this way, this poem straddles the ideas of interactive spiritual transition and account of an event; for the audience it creates a moment that fuses the two. Out of this fusion comes another: the degraded sanctity of the parent/child connection and the secular innocence of the child's turn to self-destructive expression. Like "song no. 2," her revelation directs its testimony to the community moreso than the speaker. Sanchez enacts a first-person voice more directly in this poem, however, to offer up the girl's isolation and recovery.

Community and music are often part of the poet's testimony to life and healing. These forces encircle and enable the speaker again when novelist Toni Cade Bambara, who moved to Sanchez's Philadelphia neighborhood, died there in 1995. In "Remembering and Honoring Toni Cade Bambara," Sanchez allows that testimony has the power to comfort when life surrenders and death transforms our presence. Sanchez draws on the participatory action of songs as vessels of ritualized acceptance and transition. Adapting repetition that recalls the hymns of the traditional black church, she creates a first-person persona whose voice strongly disavows grief, making it difficult to think of the poem as an elegy. On behalf of Bambara, the speaker testifies to her belief in humanity rather than extolling her qualities. This speaker's testimony, a message for the community to which Bambara was devoted, enlarges our insights on the subject. Her speaker intones: "We must all say I have/ Become life, look at me/I have become life…/ I

move like the dawn with a tint of blue / in my hair…/ My hands holding up life" (*LS* 124). The body here is marked by the shifting colors of dawn, imagery that emphasizes what the deceased has become in spirit rather than bemoaning what she cannot continue to be physically. It participates through the speaker's hands as they demonstrate an ongoing connection to the life cycle. The poems' songlike nature also validates Bambara's activism by reiterating that even after death, our experience may be of service.

Undoubtedly as an act honoring Bambara's response to the cancer that claimed her, the poem refuses any victimization black women may read in their subject position. Instead, Sanchez invokes the eternal, making the surrender of anger and hopelessness both beautiful and divine. She offers the audience a holy, assuring and purifying black woman's voice through its testimony. She also enables that voice a more oral/aural and literary access into the African-American sermonic tradition.

Like the Bambara poem, "kwa mama zetu waliotuzaa (for our mothers who gave us birth)" emphasizes voice over the body and brings an element of song to its reckoning. The poem exemplifies the dual aspects of testimony. In praise for its subject, Sanchez's mentor, Shirley Graham Du Bois, it cites her impact while also giving witness to a spiritual journey of transition from life to death. The elegy first appears in *I've Been A Woman: New and Selected Poems* (1978). It includes motifs of journey by walking, the natural world, the crossing of boundaries between the domains of spirit and flesh, and breath as a confirming sign of human capacity. The poem unfolds as a ceremony, eulogizing DuBois in two alternating parts—one a narrative of Du Bois's profound impact in elegant phrasing, the other, a series of chants that mark the speaker's procession through grief. The circumstances of her death from cancer also emerge in these sections. Sanchez begins with a ritualized narrative that invokes the accompanying mood imagistically: "death is a five o'clock door, forever changing time. /…and it was morning male in speech/ feminine in memory" (*IBW* 99).

By calling out to DuBois in direct address, Sanchez confronts her corporeality and her absence. This loss of a significant female elder is visceral for Sanchez, who lost her mother at one and the grandmother who raised her at six. Powerful references to both their bodies carry the gutting effect of pain felt by speaker and subject. Sanchez questions "what Pennsylvania day was i sucking dry/ while you stuttering a thousand cries" (100). By cataloguing acts that name Du Bois as an exemplar of cultural consciousness, the poet strives to encompass and share her depth. Simultaneously, through Sanchez's testimony, she mourns for a past made greater because DuBois was alive and reckons with the gaping void she leaves in the present. Her praise for one who "trained in the world's studio" and "painted the day with palaces" (100) attests to the sweeping capacity Sanchez connects to Du Bois, even in her gradual deterioration and dying.

When Sanchez enacts black women's voices through testimony, she expands the sound of experiential knowledge these voices contain and its reach as well; she increases black female presence. What also increases is the dynamic of testimony, as its effect reaches out to an audience of listeners or readers. With this idea of testimony applied to Sanchez poems, black women emerge as developed speakers and subjects, connected within and beyond themselves. These poems accomplish artful ways of sustaining life by crafting black female voices reflecting desire and effort to heal and change .

Form: Slash, Chant, and Blues

On her 2004 CD, "full moon of Sonia", Sanchez shows more outright inclination to sing poems than previously. However, without ever hearing her work aloud, music's impact on Sonia Sanchez would come clear in the fact that seven poem titles include the word "song" or describe a type of song. These poems appear as early as her second book, *We A BaddDDD People* (1970), a section of which is titled "Love/Songs/Chants". The poet clarifies this connection in a conversation with Sascha Feinstein:

I grew up with music. My father was a drummer and a schoolteacher
in Birmingham, Alabama…Music has been part of my life for a very
long time, and…has helped me survive for a very long time, too (156).

As a means of thinking more about form, I want to develop discussion around Sanchez's musical qualities, briefly noted earlier. I focus on her use of repetition in three formal aspects: blues and chant forms, as well as the typographical slash. This turn to the matter of Sanchez's formal approaches shows that the naming of black women is a multidimensional task for this poet, as present technically as in her engagement with subject matter and gesture, orality and voice. It represents her tendencies in a way similar to the polyrhythmic quality of African music, in that she is never doing only one thing; it is best to think of this discussion as a series of layers rather than separate turns. A pivotal example is "kwa mama zetu waliotuzaa", a poem cited above in regard to its naming of actions and gestures, yet which actually incorporates every aspect of this discussion—voice and testimony, form and repetition. Following a contextual turn to the slash, the chant, and aspects of the blues, I will address this poem among others that speak to Sanchez's relationship with repetition and musical forms.

All sorts of sound have long been important to Sanchez. Her readings feature hisses, hums, Xhosa tongue clicking, wails and screams, and her comment that "when I use music…I try to make people hear that which they ignore" sets a context for this section (*Conversations* 162). Yet she has long-established concerns for rendering sound on paper also. The slash is one example. Undoubtedly the most curious element in a discussion of Sanchez's repetitive musical forms is the typographical slash. At the onset of her publishing career, Sanchez's frequent use of the slash became an identifiable feature of her work. Nine of the 21 poems collected in her 1969 debut, *homecoming,* include them. By the appearance of *We A BaddDDD People,* they become standard, appearing in all but seven of its 42 poems. Her slashes have usually stood by as a silent and under-interpreted issue. They could appear to stand in for punctuation, but they

are not a substitute for the period, as Sanchez applies that when she wants it. Fitted to a range of tones, her slash takes part in the socially critical poem and the coarse invective as well as those that are personal and loving. Included among "typographical stylistics" that BAM poets embraced, it may have suffered some critical derision and faddish popularity in that time at the hands of apprentice poets (Henderson 28). It would be reductive to assign Sanchez's use of the slash simply to early 20th century avant-garde influences. More broadly, they signal an Afro-Modernist effort among BAM poets seeking to engage texts–and a reading/listening audience—with inscriptions of aural representation.

During the BAM period, Sanchez takes seriously the embrace of African cultures endorsed by most black nationalist factions. In her work since, she continues to explore, apply, and adapt its available modes of expression. A distinct outcome is the incantation, integral to ritual speech and song for several African cultures, which is of continuing interest to Sanchez. Its dramatic power is an aural force she draws upon in her poems early on. By 1978, when she publishes *I've Been A Woman: New and Selected Poems,* patches of incantation appear more frequently in Sanchez poems. It continues to surface in her work through the 1980s and 1990s, and notable examples include "MIAs" and the often anthologized "An Anthem." The closing section of the exceptional *Does Your House Have Lions* (1997) invokes the dying moments of the poet's brother with a call-and-response chant of Wolof and English. Rarely does a chant dominate the entire poem. Instead it arises periodically, turning away from the poem's more linear progression as the bridge of a song might do. These incantatory stanzas tend to occur in certain types of poems, where political or social conditions threaten the fabric of life. They serve to remind us of the spirit worlds which function in a different relationship to time and yet, arguably, intersect with 'reality'. On this note, chant seems especially important when subjects transition from the living world, or some blurring of time and space occurs. Sanchez confirms that "[t]hat's what I try to capture when I chant: a combination of what is ancient and what is

modern" (*Conversations* 162). I read in her statement a concern with progress, a constant theme in her work. She avoids nationalist tendencies toward intensely backward-looking romantic attachment to Africa by drawing this vital element into contemporary cultural discourse. In turn, the presence of chant may also suggest an effort to acknowledge and demonstrate spirituality and a viable sense of sacred voice-music, for Sanchez and others represent a generation of black poets whose politics led them mostly away from conventional African-American religion, even if its modes of discourse appear in some of their work.

If chant tends to capture Sanchez's increasing attention to the sacred, blues forms are a richly secular choice for the poet. The blues takes up prominent residence in her work as sensibility and outright song. Through the 1980s and onward, in *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (1984) and *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987), Sanchez covers the conventional blues terrain of longing and desire**.** She returns to it in *Wounded in the House of A Friend* (1995), moving from a standard form to its graphic, prose reversal in the title poem. Throughout, this matter of blues secularity is not an absolute, as Tony Bolden indicates in writing that "blues music deals in ritual and incantation. The desired effect conjoins flesh and spirit and compels physical movement" (49). Bolden's scholarship on the blues as resistance music is a valuable lens through which to read Sanchez's handling of the form. She is prone to adhere to some conventions while challenging others.

Sanchez locates this challenge in the figure of Bessie Smith: "When I do a blues," Sanchez explains, "I try to make it 'smart' sometimes, I try to infuse an urban style blues, because [of] Bessie [Smith] …there was a tartness there,… a smartness there" (163). Her comment also suggests the usefulness of blues as an oppositional structure prone to nuances and invested in language, themes, and experiences that have included many black women. Sanchez reflects the knowledge that black women have long been vital carriers of cultural traditions and tellers of particular truths. During enslavement, resilience and innovation spoke

from their quilt patterns. Escape plans formed and changed as they sang hymns in makeshift churches and chanted over laundry. These, Angela Davis emphasizes, were days of consuming, collective struggle. Post-emancipation, the formalizing of African-American religious traditions turned patriarchal, yielding diminished access for black women's individual voices and increasingly diverse realities. (9). There were still messages to be carried out into the culture, however. Much of this role, when the messages came from women, fell to blues singers. Blues women sang the blues of far-ranging phenomena and the blues of immediate conditions, the blues of labor and migration, sexual hunger and conquest. I find Sanchez continuing this work through blues forms. Like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and more recent others, her songs also carry messages, telling the daily truths of the world as known by black women.

How Sanchez "sings," so to speak, is the question at hand. Poems help to illuminate and enlarge upon these contextual remarks. I turn first to the slash, since the most pressing secondary question to elaborate among these forms is likely to involve how a typographical slash relates to musicality. Aldon Nielsen's positioning of the slashes within Afro-Modernist tradition also makes a galvanizing claim. He sees their use by Sanchez, appropriately, in relationship to A.B. Spellman and Amiri Baraka as exhibitors of a "critical juncture between the modernist form of Pound and Williams, the alteration of those forms at the hands of the authors of the New American Poetries (esp. Olson's projective verse), and the historicized particularities of black vernacular expressive forms graphed in black writing" (98). This last point is critical to appreciating how Sanchez uses of them. In short, there are aspects of black expression that do not readily translate to language as such. Smitherman has famously described this set of responses as "tonal semantics," wherein "the voice is employed like a musical instrument with improvisations, riffs, and all kinds of playing between the notes" (134). Alongside blues and chant, then, it is possible to recognize the slash as a "graph" or register of such expression.

Looking back to an example from *We A BaddDDD People* (1970), "now poem. for us" gives language to the speaker's fear of culture's potential to be unraveled by toxic ignorance. Her prayer begins, direct and desperate:

don't let them die out
these old / blk / people
don't let them cop out
with their memories
of slavery / survival (67)

The slashes seem to spike the lines at points that implore with urgent silences. What could be contained in these silences that paper cannot sustain as can the voice? The speaker refers indirectly to the tragedy of unrecorded losses, among African-American people, that are already so vast as to be unspeakable. Its expression may take various sonic directions, all of which are wordless, moving between the words like Smitherman's idea of inflections "between the notes" (134). The slash, which seems to divide words like "slavery" and "survival" also unites across the thickly- inflected middle.

As equally, the Sanchez slash also marks a resonance of sound in the text— what Elizabeth Frost calls "visual disruptions that suggest the primacy of pitch, tone, and duration" (77). Here Sanchez seems to indicate a verbal lightning bolt, a striking profundity in the words, a register of the inflections carried by their individual and joint association. Quite possibly, the slashed lines above could denote Frost's "duration" – a place where the poet's voice, alone might enlarge the word by humming, or with accompaniment, the echo of a cymbal. In the implication of sound held open, something endures; something vibrates, as with "baby." (*SL*3). The same is true of "life / poem," also from this early collection. In a tone suggesting clear-eyed stoicism, the speaker meditates on the approach of an inevitable death brought on by a hostile relationship to her homeland. Whether she will take violent action in the interim that hastens her demise is the

question. She speculates, “shall i scream [/] …a long / loud / scream” (55). This poem is full of taut emotional qualities—despair overlaid by a sense of duty to a cause and inevitable loss to which the words never fully admit. This point calls up Nielsen’s reading of the slash as “the hinge of Atlantic Middle Passage, linking African and European narratives permanently in a motion of history that is constantly disruptive, constantly teetering”—and the possibility of the scream-as-music that Coltrane introduced to us (102).

As a notation of the unspeakable and the nonverbal, the slash clearly affixes performance and improvisation to readings of Sanchez. It also brings to mind Benston’s observation (made in regard to Sanchez’s “a/coltrane/poem”) that “Sonia Sanchez pursues a concept of form and meaning as indistinguishable activities of poetic articulation” as an indication of how sound, voice, and music are inseparable features (155). Certainly, Lorenzo Thomas is emphatic and clear that for Sanchez (and other BAM poets he identifies), “[t]ypography…was important” as part of the “social utility of art” and when done well, “showed readers the mechanism of ‘taking the poem off the page.’” (211). Thomas’s cited examples of typography reflect the sprawling use of white space reminiscent of Olson’s projective verse. His point that typography serves as a way to “score” the poem applies as well, even though he does not mention the slash specifically (211). I find this device participating in the same impulse: to deliver the poem as a performative experience.

Thus, the slash participates in Sanchez’s intention, through music and repetition, to name the resonant meaning in black women’s voices. It confers inscription on the steady hum of the church sister or the possibly indignant woman in the subway means something, as does the tone they emit and the cache of space between their words. If the slash works as a score for long, unspoken stretches of emotional endurance that are also part of their experience, the theory of music shaping poetry carries implications entirely more complicated.

Incantation manifests the hum and echo that I link to the slash in a sonically far different form. The poet's voice moves between praise singer's testimony and spiritual intermediary in the ritual of "kwa mama zetu waliotuzaa (for our mothers who gave us birth)" (*SL* 23-26). A series of anaphoric lines construct the chants in which Sanchez's persona testifies to Shirley Graham DuBois's life in humility—"behind her peace, i know beauty because of her" and carves out a route to graceful acceptance of her mentor's transition– "the day is singing…/the nite is singing…/she is singing in the earth" (*SL* 25-26). Alternating chant sequences pause the testimony sections, as if to replicate the tolling of a bell that marks honorific passage into the spirit world for DuBois. Calling to the "nite made of female rain" that she is "ready to sing her song" (102), the Sanchez persona moves from inconsolable intonation that could "restring her eyes for me/ restring her body for me/ restring her peace for me" (100). Sanchez turns to indigenous cultures from both sides of the Atlantic. Acknowledging, as she often does, the common ancient practice of prayer as sacred song, the poet incorporates a Navajo chant of benediction in a petition to Olokun, Yoruba goddess of the sea, to monitor this final journey (*Conversations* 162):

> no longer full of pain may she walk
> bright with orange smiles may she walk
> as it was long ago may she walk,
> abundant with lightning steps may she walk
> abundant with green trails may she walk
> abundant with rainbows may she walk
> as it was long ago may she walk (100-101)

Chant makes us, again, conscious of breath, of the voice resonating out of one body and toward another. I note that DuBois's transition to spirit involves the walking female body, and its continued agency–even if in another realm. Sonically, incantation attests to what walking

embodies: the steadily moving, cyclical progression of life and time. Imagistically, walking references the self-possession and self-determination of 'sheroes', whether they are scholar-activists like Bambara and DuBois or simply black women whose legacy as workers required it. Through the sound of chant comes a distinctly ancient parallel to pre-capitalist, pre-colonial, and perhaps matriarchal societies.

Looking at Sanchez's handling of the blues form warrants a reminder of Henderson's concept of interrelationship between black music and poetry. Of his list of ten qualities apparent in this music, "the adaptation of song forms" (47) to poetry is most applicable. *I've Been A Woman* (1978) contains the first of three poems titled "Blues." Mapping its speaker's emotional range from anxiety and entrapment to sexual salvation, this one uses no repetition. Rather, it reveals what Kalamu ya Salaam describes as a "blues aesthetic," the soul's knowledge that "life is both sweet and sour" (13-14). Black female positionality situates this knowledge on an image. The poem questions, "won't someone open/ the door for me?", and the door becomes a bluesy sexual allusion to her body. It also honors the unstable truth, which swings toward a sweet end after the poem's sour beginning (*SL* 11). Sanchez indicates that even when using the blues, one's song may struggle for the balance of established form. In *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (1984), the second "Blues" appears, written in traditional in ababcc form. Each stanza's closing line repeats itself in variations—what Henderson calls "worrying the line" (41): "I loves a twenty year old weekends[/] dig him way down until he's glad" (*HH* 18) repeats. This first stanza closes with "you see what my wanting you has [/] done gone and made me baddddddd" (18). Also traditional is its bold sexual proclamation by a female speaker and the underlying complexity: rejection by a lover the speaker would rather retain.

Repeating the narrative of not only sexual deeds but also sexual desire links Sanchez to the classic blueswomen, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, the unknown women they represent, and their contemporary lineage. Sanchez's third "Blues" reflects the downside of that desire. Its

standard blues theme of unresolved anxiety over a lover's fidelity follows from the opening, "will you love me baby when the sun goes down" (*SL* 72). The lover woman shifts from plaintive to proactive in a 1995 poem, "Set No. 2," planning to "get me a man…who pays for it up front" (*SL* 92). These speakers are women who speculate and agitate for what they want, unafraid. Other than form, it may be this which differentiates the deliberate and focused lust of the earlier "tanka" from that of these poems. The songs these women sing make room for the possibilities. Alone or partnered, they expect to make their way in the world, which makes them formidable in a patriarchy.

The playful duality of "baddddddd" reiterates how Sanchez's penchant for song also reveals that her songs provoke, advance, and reiterate a resistance mentality. Bolden writes, "Part of the resistive challenge in blues music involves its rejection of traditional Christian views of the body," putting the transgressive sexuality of the Sanchez blues in a larger frame. His view that the blues separates sensuality from sin and embraces a "physical pleasure…vital to procreation itself" signifies another example of sacred and secular linkage (49). That linkage fits Sanchez's blues poems and black women's presence more fully into place within African-American literary tradition.

Through repetition, Sanchez enacts the merger of sacred and secular, the potency of the slash, chant and blues. Repetition is affirmation of the truth being claimed. Repetition uses sound and rhythm to deeply plant its claim. Repetition comes from a speaker who insists on self, an insistence preferable to silence by choice or by force. It takes part in the indirect and richly coded politics Bolden finds in the blues form, which present themselves as well in the slash and the chant. Each technique is linked by Sanchez to a "baddddddd" black feminist body—meaning, one that thinks, speaks, and acts on its own.

When Sanchez enacts black women's bodies and voices, she expands the awareness of experiential knowledge they possess and represent. These poems not only name black women,

but enlarge their literary presence and herstorical realities. What also increases is the dynamic of testimony, as its effect reaches out to an audience of listeners or readers. With this idea of testimony applied to Sanchez poems, black women emerge as developed speakers and subjects, connected within and beyond themselves.

"[W]ho [A]m I to [H]ave [L]oved [A]t [A]ll": Reflections[ix]

My emphasis on Sanchez from 1969 to 2000 comes from the observation that across time, her work undergoes great changes in expression, great variation in its use of forms, and evolves to share an avowedly multi-racial, multi-sexual view of community. Yet, throughout these changes, and after the BAM loses its way, poetry as an art and humanitarian justice as a commitment remain, urging her attention to how black women feel and see the world remains a primary concern. Taken together, Sanchez's goals, strategies, vision, and craft combine in a body of work that illuminates even more. Black women's bodies, visible and active, become participants in various kinds of liberation—the theme that Henderson aligns with black poetry—rather than icons, objects, or vacancies. Their long-standing and ongoing involvement in creating and sustaining African-American vernacular culture comes out of the shadows as she accommodates their voices. Through the combination of actions and speech that form their testimonies, the lived experiences of black women also gain exposure and complexity. Finally, Sanchez's performative dynamics collect these lived experiences in ways that situate black women's subjectivity, agency and advocacy in a viable herstorical context.

> Because of our herstory here in this country, we have always moved in this womanist, socially conscious, woman-of-color fashion, always with values that spoke to us surviving…, keeping the family together, and moving toward some kind of freedom…our sensibilities, our sensitivity, our herstory made us approach the whole idea of what it was to be a black woman in a different fashion, in a different sense. (*Conversations* 103-104)

This 1999 interview by India Dennis-Mahmood indicates that Sanchez is a poet, a seeker, and a visionary. She maintains a black womanist version of feminism, a transformation of her

initial nationalist stance within the BAM. The impact of Sanchez, the BAM and its aftermath has led me to the larger project of reading these poems. I have tried to answer my own wonderment at what Neal initiated in Sanchez by asking, "whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or that of the oppressors?" and by claiming that "the question of human survival is at the core of contemporary experience. The black artist must address himself to this reality in the strongest terms possible" (64). Had he lived on, Neal might well not say this now—or not with the all-purpose male pronoun which was common parlance in 1968. My effort also positions her ongoing poetic practices in relation to Baraka's writing about "black power" as "blackness conscious of itself" and a "total reflection…spiritually, emotionally, and historically in tune with black people," though he might not put it quite that way now ("Autobiography" 45, 42). In looking back, I do not seek to decontextualize the cultural stranglehold Neal, Baraka, and others attempted to break. Rather, I am after a reconsideration of their impact. My effort aims to draw out some clarity and appreciation of how Sanchez responded. I find that she applied those assertions, *without totalizing,* to insightful constructions of black women, in poems drawn from their positional experience and knowledge. In this, she enacts the Gramscian concept of intellectual work that Hall endorses. Her work, poetry in this case, is part of a larger struggle that must be shared, not an end in itself —and she precedes Hall in carrying it out ("Theoretical Legacies" 281). Sanchez work here reveals what she understands about agency. Knowing that as a poet she could, among other things, replace Neal's pronoun, and apply Baraka's definition of black power to the survival of black women, she adds her power to their voices and gives their hearts air.

CHAPTER THREE

LUCILLE CLIFTON: "[A] [C]ITY/ OF A [W]OMAN"

This chapter takes its name from "what the mirror said," a poem Lucille Clifton published in *Two Headed Woman* (1980). It does so well poetry's job of compressing intellect, emotion, and the sensory by encasing the intricacies of black female subjectivity in the vibrant representation of a city. The powerful and multiple implications of this line drive this discussion of how Clifton names black women's bodies and voices in her poems; indeed, it launches the point: Clifton names a sole black woman as "a city" (GW 169). What is the nature of such an idea? Of what size, mood, and quality are her neighborhoods? Who populates her? What systems keep her going? How do the senses affect this image? How does this image compare to those which mass culture and literature generates? Is every other black woman a city as well, and if so, what kind of nation, then, could a mass of black women embody? Such are the layered connotations that Clifton's attention to black women's bodies yields in only one line of one poem. Where black women are concerned, Lucille Clifton's typically short poems come densely packed with such richness. Clifton's extensive career as a poet exemplifies the black feminist literary praxis at the core of this study. Her pursuit of poems that reclaim and recast our bodies and voices unveils many insights as to how we might "be splendid in new bones" (*GW* 118).

To the subject of the female body, Clifton has drawn particular attention, pushing past the bold precedents set down by Sexton and Plath.[x] By centering those poems on black women's bodies she steps onto ground broken by Brooks. There Clifton begins erecting the cities within them in such varied quantity across her work that we can recognize a country of women developing. Beyond those that will be discussed here, many more such examples exist. Clifton is drawn to biblical topics; among these, she writes a number of persona poems in the voice of Mary, mother of Jesus. Another grouping I call "significant women" identifies, usually in direct

address, community and family figures: these cities form a sort of region of generation and race, class and place between black women from Clifton's past: her sisters Elaine and Jo, her friend Merle, and Miss Rosie, a homeless woman, for example. Within and yet beyond this category is Thelma Sayles, Clifton's late mother, a shrouded, mystical city in ruins to which Clifton makes pilgrimage in poems as early as 1974 and as recent as 2008.

Clifton's body representations parallel an ancient city's endurance as they notice that which deteriorates, weathers, and blooms, all at once. Such a city sustains its necessary dependence on the energies of nature and people, and yet, regenerates through shifts in the terrain and various migrations. Thus, touches of attention that the black woman's body as subject receives in the politically conscious *Good Times* (1969) and *Good News About the Earth* (1972) expand to a flourishing theme in *An Ordinary Woman (*1974). These poems register a changing climate that that surrounds black women, as they come to print at a high point in the American Women's Movement. Adding meaning to that Movement's emphasis on conception, maternity, parenthood, and matrilineage is Clifton's own status, by this time, as a mother.

As is Clifton's propensity, other poems problematize the city imagery of black women we might wish to sustain. A series of body-oriented poems revealing her fascination with the Hindu goddess Kali also emerge in *An Ordinary Woman*. They counter the idea of city as a site of cultural uplift and advancement by acknowledging the mediating threat of vengeful, destructive parallels within black women. *Generations,* her only prose work, which follows in 1976, recounts her wealth of family history with particular attention to female ancestors. The poet portrays women descended from female warriors of Dahomey, capable of a personal power which can turn violent. Such volatile images of the city move in tandem with changes in the poet's own body and her regard for it. Clifton writes, in *Next* (1987) about primal body relationships: her bouts with cancer, the deaths of her mother and of her husband. As the first

in which poems about her childhood sexual abuse by her father surface, this volume makes special testimony to Clifton's regard for her own corporeality.

These themes remind us that cities conjure and contain spiritual as well as physical presences that align them with bodies as sacred spaces, as a whole and in part. This alignment recurs in *Quilting* (1991), a book in which Clifton stops to praise her uterus, and menstruation in general. She goes further, hailing menopause in "to my last period" (*Q* 59). In *The Book of Light* (1993), she reveals that doubt and vulnerability last years after abuse, traceable to "the dark/where the girl is/ sleeping "(*BL* 43) and "a shadow…/rising on the wall" (43). After she suffers breast cancer and Lorde, her contemporary, dies of it, Clifton writes back to us all about survival in *The Terrible Stories* (1996). In this book, she honors Lorde's penchant for revisionist mythmaking and echoes Adrienne Rich's entwining of woman and fox to associate black women's bodies with spiritual survival and resiliency.

In the poems about those bodies, the peculiarly American construction of race makes itself known; although the message, in many of her body-centric poems, capably cuts across racial, class, sexuality, and even gender divides, it often begins very squarely and consciously within Clifton's own subjectivity. Most consistently, she emphasizes as her goal writing that raises the importance of being human (Glaser 313). Still, in doing so, Clifton does not seek to generalize or neutralize her speakers, the persona of "Lucille" or her actual self. Hearing herself described as a poet who 'happens to be black' has been known to irk the poet profoundly; Clifton is very definite about how she came to be. Clifton's view is that her poetry "is not about the surface of things" or "forgetting", but "about remembering, because memory is what we have" (Glaser 313). This view helps explain her insistence on sustaining the narratives—from family stories, dreams, research, or memories—that inform her identity and enable her imagination. Writing out of her own particulars gives us her take on being a specific human. Her poem underscores this as the mirror who sees inside its reflection asserts, "you got a geography/of

your own" (*GW* 169). Her consciousness of herself as possessor of a black female body enforces connection between that body, the cultural practice of writing, and the poetry which is a product of both.

Complex channels of language enable such a "city of a woman" to stand for herself and others. The diverse layers of past, present and future inscribed in and on her body, its performance of written expression, and its poems feed inextricably off each other. The mirror stakes out the power this interactive figure possesses by saying "somebody need a map/ to understand you. / somebody need directions/ to move around you" (169). Her urgent certainty opposes the tragedy of losing the city of oneself. She offers instead an expansive body, one through which black women may find and visualize themselves as heirs to a diverse locus of images, motion, forces, and specialized knowledge.

It is vital to acknowledge that Clifton's stance on identity is oppositional in substantial quarters of contemporary American poetry. Among poets and critics within those circles a lingering aspect of New Critical influences continues to validate, as transcendent and universal, poetry which sheds any overt social references or identity markers[xi]. To describe her 1950s apprenticeship under these ideals, Adrienne Rich writes "I had been taught that poetry should be 'universal'…non-female" (1163). Throughout the achievements of Hughes, Brooks, Baraka, and other twentieth century poets, discomforts remain on this issue of assimilating the poet's identity –an issue each poet has addressed. When socio-political consciousness, identity, and autobiographically-informed material combine, as often happens with Clifton, such poems may yet incur a degree of disdain among critics put off by free verse and/or by a valuation of content and context equivalent to form. Judgments of such poems as remnants of 'confessional' or 'self-conscious' poetry also persist, although lesser and unevenly applied over the past thirty to fifty years. In this same period, expanded directions in American poetry, incited by forces such as the New York School, the BAM, multiple feminisms, performance theory, and various waves of

experimentalism, have coexisted; gradually, boundaries have blurred, and multiple traditions have been somewhat conceded. Today, the "decentralization of literary production in the US," as Hank Lazer puts it, has, fortunately, moved the situation beyond reliable opposition to the naming of a black female self (503-505).

For Clifton, gender compounds race, making the subjectivity she expresses more contentious, and not simply in the eyes of a patriarchal white poetic hegemony. In 2001, Rich, despite her advance of critical consciousness, describes "the marketing of a United States model of female–or feminine" writing as "self-involvement and self-improvement, devoid of political context or content" ("Credo" para. 6). Her analysis illuminates the tendency of white feminists to assume their control of perspective and discourse on U.S. women. Rich reveals the rift this failing reliably opens with black feminists in her dismissal of the particularly political meaning of personal writing for black women. These issues nourish ongoing tensions about the creative choices African-American poets make amid the power bases and identity-bound linings of American poetry establishments.

Nellie McKay explodes this tension with some excellent and much-needed historical perspective, affirming that Clifton's insistence on self-inclusion is decidedly political. Her act participates in a literary tradition that needed to break fundamental hegemonic rules of U.S. cultural practice in order to exist at all. McKay substantiates Clifton's position by referring to a "legacy" of the "triumphant black experiential self," which can certainly apply to poetry, even though she writes about prose memoir and autobiography (97). McKay cites Craig Werner's assessment that historically, "black life stories …[in print] were 'signifying metaphors' for secure identities"(96). Black poetry such as Clifton's, then, ranks among "linguistic achievements affirming a rejection of white-imposed denigration of a black self and, in the best of American traditions, making proud assertions of a new identity" (96). I suspect that a racial comfort zone among white American poets, progressive as some may be, creates a lag in accepting just how

hardily racism thrives in the lives of contemporary black and other people of color; this blindness or dismissal, then, also blinds this community to the need for poets like Clifton to particularize race—and its links to gender, sexuality, and class– in her poems. In response, Clifton says "it adds to [readers'] understanding if they know…that I am black and female…*all* of what I am is relevant" (Rowell 4).

This view certainly derives from the influences of place and time: born in Depew, New York to working-poor migrants in 1935, the option to avoid recognizing race and/or gender did not exist. Clifton joins a family that inherits not only an African- American oral culture by which to affirm itself but their own place in it through family stories of matrilineage, enslavement, and freedom. This legacy forms the subject matter of her 1976 memoir, *Generations*. Clifton grows up associated with the powerful women of Dahomey, West Africa, already connected to a 'motherland' that black nationalism sought to reconstruct as a signifier of pride and restored lineage. But to this context we must add the narrative of Clifton's own body to fully appreciate her position about the specificity of personal experience. In a scant overview drawn from the scholarship of Mary Kay Lupton, Clifton's life makes an awesome statement. As a child, she experiences sexual abuse by her father. Six times, Clifton gives birth, among pregnancies that ended in abortion. She outlives two of those children, all of her immediate family, and her husband. Four times, Clifton is diagnosed and treated for cancer. Once, in 1994, she undergoes a mastectomy. Kidney failure leads to dialysis and later, a transplanted kidney, donated by her daughter Alexia (112). Surely, when "the mirror" begins its survey of the woman-city with the emphatic "listen. / you a wonder," it not only implicates but directly addresses the poet.

To these stores of personal experience, Clifton adds her focused pursuit of knowledge about black women. Family stories she has preserved and material evidence from her visits to plantations exhibit the world enslaved Americans created. According to the dialectic of knowledge as wisdom and survival that Collins builds into black feminist epistemology, Clifton

is, therefore, well "situated" to translate the codes of black women's bodies (19). She knows their interior climates, topography, and cultures; she knows their neighborhoods, from street to alley to windowsill, well enough to understand how much unknown remains.

As Collins describes the body of "critical social theory" that includes "Black feminist thought," that theory creates a bridge between poetry and activism (9). Such a bridge was articulated earlier by BAM poets and theorists, a necessity as they sought to overcome the notion of a binary separation between artistic practice and political discourse (although that support did not openly include feminist activism and discourse). Poetry grounded in experiences such as Clifton's has value as artistic work and for its "efforts to come to terms with lived experiences within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and religion" (9). These are efforts which express a "commitment to justice;" thus, Collins recognizes, importantly, that such art such as Clifton's is an expression of that political commitment (9). Her bridge-building materials, words, are chosen to achieve qualities like euphony through their sound and justice in their substance. A further expression of Clifton's politics appears in her occasional choice of distinctly African-American linguistic styles, a point to which I will return later in this chapter. Clifton cleaves to the idea of indirection in African-American literary tradition, perhaps because she prefers what *appears* simple. While she avoids demagoguery and self-aggrandizing gestures in aiming for emotional common denominators and verbal democracy, her work, by its subject matter and technical choices, reflects quite an emphatic interest in justice. It reads in the taut, ironic language and the implicit centeredness of meter in "in the inner city/ or/ like we call it / home" (*GW* 15). The firmly assonant "i am on their side/ riding the late bus into the same /someplace i am on the dark side always" takes it stand in tones that recall the deliberate music of Civil Rights front liners (*Q* 18). Clifton echoes herself: "I certainly, purposefully, wish to be read and understood…by literary critics and theoreticians, and also by my Aunt Timmy and my Uncle Buddy. I always wanted to be

understood and to speak to and for, if possible, people [on] a whole lot of levels" (Rowell 68-69). These lines and her insights underscore the city's body and also its voice as powerful, intricate directions for Clifton.

In this chapter I assert that Clifton amplifies this connection. By naming black women's bodies in specific ways in her poems, she validates those whose individual and collective lived experiences, suppressed and diminished by outward forces, nevertheless remain. When Collins writes that "clarifying black women's experiences and ideas lies at the core of Black Feminist Thought," (16) she refers us to the junction of linguistic power and self-definition at which the Clifton poems in this study take shape. The cultural practice of writing as Clifton does means that she is, in the poems I will discuss below, a writer of a particular type of herstory. I stretch the limited idea that herstory simply reinscribes a patriarchal construction of chronological history with women's presence. Validation carries equal importance for literary art, in which black women's bodies, voices, stories, and styles are still, in this early twenty-first century, just coming to light. A reading of Clifton's work that gleans what those bodies hide is enabled by framing herstory within poetry's associative language.

Beautiful Fortresses: Clifton and the Mirror

Wisdom and knowledge as Clifton weaves them together in her poems generate an ongoing exchange regarding issues of representation and black womanhood. Countless feminist and womanist scholars—from Maria Stewart and Nannie Burroughs to Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Frances Beale, and Barbara Christian and others– have repeatedly cited perhaps the most central issue: black women's subject position of race and gender creates a 'triple consciousness'. It is a status reminiscent of DuBois's racial double consciousness which gender intensifies (8). Externally, they must contend with a two-pronged perception– as black people, and as women–that racism and sexism skews. Class and sexuality only multiply the possible skewers. Simultaneously, each individual black woman faces the same internal challenges of

specific self-awareness and development common to us all. Whatever private wish for positive recognition black women may experience and /or want in the outside world thus becomes quite complicated.

Beverly Guy-Sheftall shows how race and sex converge as pillars of a black womanhood constructed by slavery: "The notion of woman as saint or virtuous lady in the minds of white men could not have applied to Black women, given the need to justify slavery" (30). Her point that "the Black woman was devalued not only because of her supposed racial traits, but also because she departed from whites' conception of the True Woman" (23) points succinctly to the public and self-image issues in the struggle for self-definition black women wage during and well after enslavement. Between self-definition and this legacy of habitual dehumanization and abuse, a dissonance occurs that involves shame and inadequacy as enduring common denominators. Largely unspoken, these codes pass on through the generations as language, behavior, and visual imagery that produce implicit and explicit constructions of black women as insignificant, unworthy of respect, ugly (in a fundamentally objectionable way) and defeminized.

Against these forces, Clifton locates beauty and power in black female subjects. externally and internally. Her definition spreads in scope well beyond the predictable and hegemonic, just as the Black Power Movement and the BAM embraced the word black. Those movements transform it to a capitalized signifier of progressive resistance; feminists follow a similar route to disassociate passive fragility with the word woman. Clifton's readers may appreciate both the challenge of this view and how she renders it. In her poems celebrating black female beauty, the Venus figure on the half-shell is entirely re-imagined, if not irrelevant. The Clifton figure is much darker skinned and fleshier than the original. Her hair is definitely kinky and very well might be gray. Clifton defines these bodies as symbols of beauty and her poems name them beautifully human. The beauty Clifton finds in black women affirms a

resistant aesthetic: thinking of them as cities triggers the enriching possibility that they may also be fortresses, equally capable of beauty and strength.

By inscribing a notion of femininity that black women's status as enslaved property made unlikely, Clifton refuses to preserve the patriarchal dogma that upheld enslavement. By her measure, Sojourner Truth was as beautiful as she was physically powerful when she declared "look at my arm…" in 1853 (36). Truth gives black women room to be ferocious and physically protective. Their beauty is multifaceted, not synonymous with the European phenotype idealized and cherished by Western cultures: it comes from the looks of these bodies, what they do, what they mean for her and symbolize more broadly. Clifton enlarges this mood of great possibility in poems centered on the beautiful in black females. The physical strength expected and demanded of black women historically merges with their social location as irreparably longsuffering martyrs, (also translated in the outside world as strength). That perception has masked what Clifton exposes as strength of self-perception and vision. This is a vision of what black women may believe possible but find missing, too often, in the world.

In many of her body-centered poems, Clifton's uses of metaphor show what this technique does so well: metaphor offers us new ways of seeing black women subjects that break with superficial and external readings. *Two-Headed Woman* (1980) contains an entire section entitled "homage to mine." With their outpourings of metaphor, her series of homages are the most direct examples of black women's bodies as subjects of celebration and depth. The poems release these bodies from associations with labor, stability, and fortitude. Infusing the black female body with motion enhances that release, distancing it from the realm of object. Clifton's lived experience is indeed a crucial pretext here; even the "mine" of the heading invites provocative questions: what does a black woman claim to own? How does she do so? How does the very body that is now hers to own, name, and reimagine figure into ownership?

Clifton tends to answer this question of body ownership metonymically. For example, one homage extols kinky hair, perhaps the most synecdochically apt of images for black women. Of all the physical qualities particular to them, hair is undoubtedly the one which most distances them from the white ideal of feminine beauty that patriarchal racist hegemony consistently reinforces. This hair, so routinely depicted as a mark of ugliness and a curse, unfit for public view, may, therefore, carry the most inflammatory burdens. Lived experience positions Clifton to recognize that gross insecurities regarding our hair continue to plague black women as a group, despite forty years of effort by pro-black forces to break the hold of the 'good hair' phenomenon. In "homage to my hair", Clifton gathers up the toxic mix of negative energies– anxiety, self-loathing, envy, and desperate, temporary solutions –black women have accumulated through perceptions of their hair as 'bad' and simply discards them. No ritual description of tortuous hot comb scenarios here, no ode to the surviving scalp for Clifton. Cathartic as such accounts might be for black and especially women readers, the poet does not draw that experience down into the poem to testify. Instead, she heads straight toward healing:

> when i feel her jump up and dance
> i hear the music! my God
> i'm talking about my nappy hair!
> she is a challenge to your hand
> black man,
> she is as tasty on your tongue as good greens
> black man,
> she can touch your mind with her electric fingers and
> the grayer she do get, good God
> the blacker she do be! (*GW* 167)

Quite simply, the embrace of this subject matter alone strikes a bold blow for self-definition. Kinky hair is and has been the cross on which those black women who own it have hung alone. When Ntozake Shange writes "maybe god didn't love me & my brown krinkly short head of hair was a mark / letting the whole world know / god's not on this chile's side", she crystallizes this reality (xvii). Black men have used it in vernacular culture as a metonym for the combined deficits of the Sapphire stereotype. White popular culture has sustained a long and loving regard for the picaninny, her hair the best evidence of an untamed Africa to be suppressed and controlled. Mocked and self-mocking, judged and self-judging, black women have not truly withstood this torrent. Perceiving, through experience, kinky hair as the most irascible of the "racial traits" Guy-Sheftall points to which set them apart from a feminine ideal, black women's typical response to this hair has been embarrassment, shame, resignation, and devotion to a range of remedies (23). A late 1960s-mid-1970s period that roughly corresponds with the BAM, when the advent of the Afro and related 'natural' hair styles appeared, is the one clear twentieth century exception (and even this claim glosses the matter somewhat). One of the BAM's many contributions to contemporary American culture, in fact, is in generating a climate of positive black self-regard in which Clifton might write such a poem.

That said, a cursory look at anthologies from the BAM period reveals a steady celebration of black beauty in certain respects but nothing that targets and elevates hair. Clifton's may well be the early few poems to gain wide publication which engages this subject matter, particularly in so positive a fashion. The other contenders would be Lorde's "Naturally" and "To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals" from Gwendolyn Brooks. The poems by Clifton and Brooks form an intertextual conversation in that both connect kinky hair to music, although it is not clear which poem was written first. Ironically, Clifton's hair homage in *Two-Headed Woman* and Brooks' poem, in *A Primer for Blacks,* both appear between 1980 and 1981, a period in which Reagan's election seems to signal the defeat of progressive lifestyles and ideals,

including an overt embrace of Blackness. Many adult black women have returned to various processing rituals by this point, and younger women have adopted new ones.

The timing of the homages' appearance makes Clifton's expression of welcome and gestures of ownership more poignant on multiple levels. I offer the metonym a transition to metaphor: under the aegis of Clifton, the hair is a prodigal daughter, returning to its body/home to be embraced. This idea reveals even more about the poem's links to the body. The speaker refers to it as female ("her"), inviting this nappy hair into its community of women rather than shunning it as an object of derision. She names her hair "nappy", thus claiming its most common and one of its most loaded terms and then transforming it by delightful tone. The hair is multidimensional, as the "challenge" and energy in its "electric fingers" allow; all of this, the tone indicates, makes it not just hair, but an experience (167).

Sensory and exuberant language connects this hair with pleasure: it is capable of dancing. This hair thrills its owner to the point of hearing music and imparting a flavor to black men "as tasty on your tongue as good greens" (167). Her use of greens is a cultural signifier here, a way of saying this hair is as valuable to the culture as collard greens—and implicitly, the women likely to be cooking them. Naming nappy hair as tasty also implies that black men wishing to affirm their Blackness might also replace their negative associations with nappy hair with others more sensory. A homecoming feast surrounds this speaker. My hair, too, she wants him to know, is part of my goodness. By addressing him on separate and repeated lines, the "black man" has been given direct invitation (167).

The black woman who speaks this poem does some multi-layered naming here. Simply by plying the subject matter, she calls to attention every black woman whose hair greets a comb with resistance. By signifying traditional African-American cultural features, she recognizes nappy hair as a wholistic cultural experience as well as a physical reality; thus, the poem subtly includes even those within the group who are straight-haired. Furthermore, Clifton's speaker

models a woman who accepts her body; the body-image battle feminists have waged and struggled to validate makes this a voice we can stand to have amplified any and everywhere. She names herself as a loving black woman simply by looking in the mirror. There she finds her body returning to her not anxiety, self-loathing, or desperation, but an enjoyable self.

To those of us feeling maligned by the American pretense to thinness, "homage for my hips" offers a sprawling assurance that "big hips…need space to move around in./they don't fit into little petty places"(*GW* 168). Clifton understands, before the advent of full-figured fashion, that self-acceptance brews a richer joy. Swirling in that joy is the freedom we have often claimed to seek through legal redress: the simple wish to be humans at ease in ourselves and in our world. Speaking volumes in the spare language for which she is known, the poet makes a proclamation important for all women, but especially directed to black women, past and present: "these hips/are free hips. they don't like to be held back./these hips have never been enslaved/they go where they want to go/they do what they want to do" (168).

Much of the discourse of enslavement involved place—that is, notions of a white power that could define, direct, and control where and how black people could occupy space. Castles on the coasts of Ghana and Senegal, the hulls of ships, auction blocks and plantation fields, and chain-gang encampments all seem hostage to this mythology. This poem repels those notions like thick walls might. Rising through the language of this homage is a black body as squarely centered as a fortress, free in its ability to withstand and comfortable in its specific beauty. Its plainly assertive tone and images normalize the speaker's view of her body. Thus, through visual and sonic means, the body is instrumental in redefining itself and its boundaries. It allows all such ideas to smash against it, deliberately and yet incidentally. We hear a profound claim to subjectivity in Clifton's personification of a black human body: it has its own wholeness, its inalienable integrity, and so does each part. We hear a flaming confidence in the blunt diction, the clipped, absolute tone, the irrefutable syntax. Once that historical truth is established, the

poet does not exercise it. She returns to the joy that her hips work in multiple and mysterious ways. Within themselves, they are entirely self-possessed and know a strength Clifton need not strain to prove. Beyond themselves, they know their "mighty" capacity to make prey of a man and "spin him like a top"— and the "magic" that the speaker uses to emblematically reject—not even resist—the discourse of slavery (168). With this reading in mind, Clifton's references to the speaker's dismissal of "little petty places" and to a "magic" that excludes and wards off outside control creates space for the hips that extends to the whole woman. Its ability to destabilize assumptions, whether about slaveholding power, black female sexuality, or their degree of agency, adds to the larger subversion of this seemingly small poem.

Black women's interiors are no less compelling to Clifton. The autobiographical traces common to her writing in this respect, notably themes exposing motherhood's complexity, appear prominently in the 1990s. Topics among her explorations of interiority include disease, menopause, reflections on mothering adult women, her past abuse, and widowhood's incumbent loneliness. The poet turns again to homage, finding much to praise even in these states of transition. Like Sexton, she finds that for all the culture's attention to the female surface, its good works and inner wonders occupy a silence worth breaking.

In "poem to my uterus," Clifton again celebrates, one body part at a time. An impending hysterectomy creates the occasion. Again, she transfers an autobiographical experience to her poem's persona. By its mere mention and frame of references, Clifton urges readers' attention to women and their bodies as members of a silent, ongoing companionship. She calls this body part "old girl," suggesting not only affection but nostalgia. Largely by metaphor, her naming of this most female part in second-person address transforms the womb. She sets a spiral of signifiers in motion that expose its archetypal imagery as patriarchal. Her speaker pays tribute to a uterus that has been "patient as a sock" while she controls its traffic; she has "slippered into it [her] dead and living children" (*Q* 59). She engineers the emergence of her uterus from its

unseen, functionary role. Much like women, and particularly black women, have brought visibility to their lives through their own adaptations of language and meaning, Clifton brings forward the hidden combination of uterine beauty and strength.

Structure and tone reveal a greater assault on the body than in the homages; in fact, a power struggle ensues just beyond the speaker's voice. Unidentified forces seeking to contest and overpower her jurisdiction have initiated this precipitous moment, making this poem a more sober celebration. The word "now," alone on its line, captures impending dread that deepens with the next several: "they want to cut you out/ stocking i will not need/ (59). An urgency hovers over the testimonial when Clifton immediately follows the line "where i am going" with the near- echo of a question: "where am i going" (59). A tone of urgency travels up through the catalogue of names she calls –"my bloody print/my estrogen kitchen"—These are private names by which she recognizes her threatened body, names she would not normally need to call aloud (59). . A sense of the sonic relationship to the city of her body comes about through this very intimate naming; body as a particular kind of city, as a sexual and textual place surface in these metaphors. They name her intimacy as well. The repetition of "my" and the reference to the "bloody print" as the mark of the speaker's uniqueness makes clear that her core identity is also threatened (59). Clifton's pronouns are deliberate gongs, pushing her claim of ownership repeatedly back against what "they" want. The word "print" aligns the uniqueness of fingerprints with this uterus; what it makes and marks its own cannot be replaced or duplicated. Unsure of how she will recognize herself, Clifton's language turns forward and back on itself to enact the uncertainty: "where can i go/barefoot/without you/where can you go/without me" (59).

Clifton's status as a black woman further complicates the poem with questions of ownership, control, and agency. The subtext here is American enslavement, for otherwise, on the surface the poem might resonate with any woman. In that past, black women's bodies were

held captive as owned objects and titled as property. Here, a similar woman struggles for dominion over her bones and skin, blood and organs. For white capitalist patriarchy, black women's wombs have been instrumental treasure chests. The womb Clifton hails represents not only her own but those black wombs which fed bodies into a worldwide system of exploitative free labor, often by force. Clifton thus makes apparent the degree of damage brought on by unrelenting sexual assault against black women, during and after enslavement.

It is also an important signifier of the black woman's body as a politically unencumbered power that Clifton shows through her uterine names. This uterus is an active, multidimensional organ, and not simply a limp sock awaiting contents. She cites its own history, its own bond of service to its body, and its own network of relationships and roles. Clifton's speaker reveals a innate comfort, playful and familiar, that the speaker's body gives back to her. Her brief but rich allusion to the uterus as a sexual zone of pleasure pushes us onto unusual terrain. This uterus has functions beyond pregnancy. In qualifying it as a "black bag of desire," this speaker entwines strength and beauty in a positive black sexuality of her own design, and honors its herstory as one she owns (59).

Entwined strength and beauty has been a difficult condition for black women to discover and embrace. Mirrors feed this difficulty. In the movement between black female exteriors and interiors, mirrors, as actual tool and symbol, cannot be overlooked. These are liminal spaces where interior meets exterior. Public perception invades private regard. In the mirror, a contested site forms, turning oppositional status from abstraction to battleground: who is this woman and how will she be judged? Which of the world's criteria for success does she find? Will she fail? What must be altered? How does the inside show through? The mirror can also be a safe space for black women, where they can remind themselves of the worth and beauty they may not see affirmed elsewhere. The questions then may turn to what features she likes best, which are the best of them, what will bring them out, who might be worthy of her company.

Mirrors are places of wins, losses, and compromises—whole cities in themselves. Morrison's Pecola Breedlove begins losing her battle in a mirror, while Brooks' Maude Martha stands there to tally how securely a dark brown wife can hold a light brown husband. Hurston's Janie Crawford begins her third stage of life in this heavily implicated spot by untying her head rag. Whatever a black woman's relationship to self, the actual representation of self, phenotype, and personality she meets there must continually confront legions of white and near-white constructions of femininity. Whatever mythologies hold sway among the powerful narratives that collide and compete for black female self-image, the mirror is where these ideas gain currency and voice. The barrage of messages black women have received and often, internalized about their bodies inform this meeting.

Clifton's full understanding of these city-sized issues makes another turn to the generous nuances of "what the mirror said" worthwhile. The poem begins:

listen.
you a wonder.
you a city
of a woman.
you got a geography
of your own.
listen.
somebody need a map
to understand you.
somebody need directions
to move around you. (*GW* 169)

With subtle humor underlying serious intent, she fudges the matter of the speaker. It could be that we have here the talking mirror of Snow White, redirected to a message more

applicable for black women. However, the subject gazing in may also be the speaker. It could also be an external voice rising from history or memory. Clifton tends to do heavy work under the veil of wry humor and wit such as operates here. This poem goes toward much more than compliments. She invites us to wonder if the women and the mirror can speak with one accord in this irrefutable certainty. The urgency of "listen"—repeated and punctuated—suggests an agenda that concurs with bell hooks' advocacy for "loving blackness as political resistance" (20). We find in this idea an aspect of the BAM's pro-Black ideology which women poets took up heartily, perhaps made more conscious of the stakes by their own mirrors. For hooks, this is not a matter of vanity or faddish valorization, but a love needed to "[transform] our ways of looking and being, and thus [create] the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life" (20).

In the imagery used here, the poem aligns with the homage series by conferring metaphors on the black female body. However, the metaphorical map is different. Clifton revels in turning away from possibly the oldest of tropes for the female form, the pastoral landscape. Citing her black female subject as a "city" signifies a narrative made of many narratives, and a dynamic structure that thrives through its own mix of powers. She invokes a refined cosmopolitan world of art, science, and commerce that "a geography of [her] own" only heightens (169). The speaker, with just these usages, has signified the science of shape, of terrain, and of systems. The rising mood, driving on past "wonder," makes this "city" an energetic one, a hopeful and productive encoding as opposed to a place synonymous with danger (169).

Having established that the black woman in the mirror possesses a range of valuable powers, the poem moves on to consider her in the world. Anyone interacting with her "need[s] directions" beforehand (169). In Holladay's interpretation, this poem seems content to rest on the woman's potent sex appeal, and so the phrase may pass for joyful hyperbole. However, I find

this phrase also complicates matters. It injects the duality for which Clifton is known. Reading in it a black feminist connotation, to rush in on the belief that the directions are only needed to handle her sexually would be to disregard her complexity. After all, a city requires many levels of expertise. Therefore, nothing should be assumed about this woman. The wonder of her now has to coexist with ironic threat. We know, of course, that people do not come with directions, and even if they did, that others tend not to read or digest directions. With this potential for her mishandling comes the mention of a man: "mister with his hands on you/he got his hands on/some damn body!" (169). Such a man could ruin her if he does not recognize her immense subjectivity. In turn, her immensity could ruin anyone attempting to engage her unprepared. Clifton ends the poem there, with the exclamation also working dually. Does the mirror-speaker riff on Jesse Jackson's Civil Rights-era protest chant, 'I am somebody'? Perhaps. More certainly, it makes the mirrored woman's subjectivity an emphatic truth, carrying with the "damn" and the unusual punctuation the unwavering tonal imprint of an older woman who might say 'let there be no question in anyone's mind' (169).

Through the act of standing up, Clifton again turns to that marvelous body as a talisman, symbolizing black women's survival in a title-less poem from *Good Woman,* "if i stand in my window" (25). To share the visual experience that accompanies its tone, I present the full text of the poem :

if i stand in my window
naked in my own house
and press my breasts against my windowpane
like black birds pushing against glass
because I am somebody
in a New Thing
and if the man come to stop me

in my own house

naked in my own window

saying i have offended him

i have offended his

Gods

let him watch my black body

push against my own glass

let him discover self

let him run naked through the streets

crying

praying in tongues *(GW* 25)

The speaker recalls the auction of black women by standing naked and visible to white power, supposed authority and judgment, embodied in the figure of "the man" (25). Her nakedness remains a sign of that experience but now stands in ironic contrast to its once-enslaved status. On her body the speaker inscribes its claim to the agency of a self free to choose when, where, and how it will be displayed. It also signifies endurance. She stands in rebellious salute to the silenced facts and the ever-present truth of American slavery. This speaker's steely commandments confiscate the power of gaze: "let him watch my black body" (25). Her act of standing now makes a thorough claim to present and future black subjectivity in that it defies both the memory and ongoing impact of the auction block.

The use of "if" extends the irony and agency of the moment. It implies that possibilities open to the speaker as speculates on an idea about which she is actually clear. Secondly, she transfers emotions of devaluation and powerlessness of being auctioned in the past onto this figure who symbolized oppression. Holladay recognizes this same ironic identity shift, in which the speaker "transforms…into an apocalyptic vision," while the "white man…undergo[es] an

identity crisis of biblical proportions," as an embodiment of black female political and personal agency (70). The revolutionary message of her thinking is inscribed on her naked skin and sustained in her naked self-definition.

The Kali poems problematize Clifton's celebration of beautiful strength with this question: does the malicious also contain its own curious mix of strength and beauty? Clifton permits her oppositional perspective to engage answers to this question through the series of poems in her collection, *An Ordinary Woman* (1974), that consider the Hindu goddess Kali. First to appear is a title-less one that "recalls the stylistic pleasures of imagism" by showing her capacity for "the stunning miniature," as Hillary Holladay has said:

Kali
queen of fatality, she
determines the destiny
of things. nemesis.
the permanent guest
within ourselves.
woman of warfare,
of the chase, bitch
of blood sacrifice and death. the mystery
ever present in us
and outside us. the
terrible Hindu woman God
Kali
who is black. (*GW* 128)

Is it reasonable to speculate on whether or not the woman addressed by the mirror, above, could also be a vision of Kali? In other words, is there a beauty, as Baraka once

suggested, "in our terribleness" (Baraka and Fundi 1970)? Could it not be likely that a woman with her own geography may also have some fair amount of ferocity? I submit that despite the speaker's struggle to elude Kali's presence in these poems, Clifton finds dissonant beauty in the undiluted force and consistency of a "woman of warfare." Certainly various types of warfare have been enacted on and in black women's bodies, if we take only examples from the past four hundred years. Psychological warfare via objectification, stereotyping, and erasure couples with physical warfare in the form of captivity, torture, rape, and lynching among other forms of murder to bring a graphic accuracy to the phrase "bitch of blood sacrifice" (*GW* 128). How could black women experience such a history of warfare and emerge as simply beautiful, or even sacred, without any sort of "permanent guest" coming into existence (*GW* 128)? Difficult as it is to cite Kali's qualities as beauty (though Hindus have long done so), it is there, much like fire can be thought of as beautiful. The beauty of this body is in its existence. Kali gives name and body—presence—to these emotions in black women. Kali's body locates elements of black womanhood which also have been lost, deformed, misdirected, scattered, and suppressed, historically and in contemporary life as well. When Holladay writes that Kali is "an inescapable dimension of the black female self," the "neglected" one who "craves nurturing," she attests to the suppression of emotions and stored reactions for which nurturing means acknowledgment, exposure, and expression(75, 77). In her willingness to talk about all kinds of truth, Clifton says, through Kali, that there is a vulnerable twin to the strength black women have been forced to discover. In turn, our perpetual demand to nurture others must surely partner with a self that needs a full portion what we give.

Clifton's decision to own these unrecognized forces by depicting them is a signifying act of freedom as naming. As Holladay writes, "Kali extends Clifton's portrait of … specifically, black womanhood" (75). Her appearance "suggests that mothers are far from being one-dimensional, pure, and selfless beings" (75). It is one thing to accept the idea of this two-sided

self, which seems reasonable as stated. In truth, Clifton's naming of Kali is remarkably bold and radical, raising various questions about how naming black women reclaims their representation and power. How do we distinguish her from Sapphire, for example, or accept her without accrediting the Sapphire mythology? Given what she is capable of, will she destroy everything? Clifton's decision on line four to let the word "nemesis" stand –as solitary sound, word, sentence and syntax—on its own is a significant acknowledgement (*GW* 128) . Finally, Kali's awesome power may oppose dominant culture constructions of black women that they themselves maintain.

Stuart Hall, in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," finds this self-denial a separate, more pernicious expression of hegemony that makes resistance a far more complex enterprise (235). At this level, hegemonic ideas permeate and undermine not only external cultural markers, but also the psyche of the oppressed group (226). It emerges as the "double-consciousness" Du Bois defines in *The Souls of Black Folk* (8) and Fanon enacts in *Black Skins, White Masks* (112-116). Clifton efficiently and perceptively expresses how black women themselves have internalized a resistance to nurturing themselves and to expressing the forces that Kali represents. Her first-person speaker in the Kali poems recognizes the Kali in herself but resists it desperately. Clifton double-binds this situation by implanting the spirit of the goddess in the speaker's body– putting her at odds with herself by setting the conflict inside her skin. Beauty and strength combine, morph, feed on themselves as the material and the spiritual cross paths.

Orality and Vernacular: Clifton's Black Iteration

The poems above display another noteworthy feature of Clifton's attention to black women subjects: the direction of her choices about language. In the chapter introduction above, I note the social and political importance of these features. They show shifts toward black vernacular diction and styles, as in "what the mirror said" and away from it, as exemplified by

the Kali poem. By vernacular, I refer to linguistic styles and also to a derivative American English, both of which are constructed and continually revised by African-American participants in a vernacular culture. Because language is as contextually important as subject matter to this study, I wish to consider how Clifton's naming practices apply here also. While I do not attempt here to advance an entire theory of the shifts in Clifton's choices, a closer look at examples may yield some insight about its occasional appearance.

The transmigrational black vernacular that I describe in Chapter Two applies not only to Sanchez, but to Clifton as well. Her exposure to a mix of rural southern and urban northern black vernaculars leads her to appropriate some of each, although this is not routine. Of the four traditions Geneva Smitherman identifies as elements of "Black Semantics" within African-American communities—Clifton's vernacular reflects a historical knowledge of servitude and oppression. This is a tradition born of racial double consciousness from which we get the idea of coded language or double-voicing. Smitherman's example, the term *Miss Ann,* a "derisive reference to the white woman," is especially apt, since "to ms. ann" is the title of a Clifton poem that holds white women on plantations accountable as accomplices in the dehumanization of black women (Smitherman 43-47; *GW* 122). When Clifton wants to unpack knowledge about injustice, to observe its lingering effects, or to thicken the alliance her speaker feels with black subjects, she is most likely to use this cultural language. In a similar vein, Clifton's choice mode of black discourse is signification and indirection, chased with a bit of "intonational contouring," or "the specific use of stress and pitch in pronouncing words in the black style" (Smitherman 145). These traits allow for plentiful uses of the irony, metaphor, and ambiguity that remain features of transmigrational vernacular.

"I am a Black woman and I write from that experience," Clifton writes in a statement collected by Mari Evans in 1984. "I do not feel inhibited or bound by what I am" (137). Given Clifton's politics and instinct for justice, writing from the "experience" of what she knows means

that her poems are orally multifaceted. She leaves room for her Georgia-born mother and Virginia-born father, the speech she has accumulated from Buffalo, Baltimore, and elsewhere. This alignment with the self-validating, identity-specific ideologies of black nationalism and feminism emerges in Clifton's approach to orality—despite her perceived distance from overt manifestations of these ideologies. *Generations* is a prime example, a memoir that preserves her family history in language written to prioritize and reconstruct black southern vernacular speech. This parallel is bolstered by the poet's assertions that she is "very interested in history" and that"[s]o much of American history is not validated, because it is seen sometimes as negative" (Cavalieri 73, 88). Elsewhere, her work– the efforts to visit plantation sites, to recall the semantic expression of her past and to devote herself to poetry that speaks for those whose voices are unrecognized, forgotten, or erased –makes plain that Clifton values vernacular culture, its language, and its epistemology (Cavalieri 86; Rowell 57-58). We can also locate evidence of her commitment to sustaining a multilayered story of black presence in America through performative speech. Black female bodies and voices are equally rendered because of the choices Clifton makes about diction. She conveys them as rooted in an expressive culture common to black women without marking her work exclusively by that single linguistic style.

Stephen Henderson emphasizes two points I have raised in regard to Sonia Sanchez which I want to link to the following discussion of Clifton's black iteration. First, Henderson stresses that the performative nature of vernacular should not be overlooked. Secondly, he finds varying replications of black vernacular speech in poetry by contemporary poets to connect their work to African-American literary traditions. We can look back to the homage series for evidence of what Henderson calls "virtuoso naming and enumerating," a quality aligned with traditional African-American folktales (33). He describes it as the sort of "witty gesture involved in nicknaming" (34), a trait highly regarded in a culture that places a priority on artful speech. Clifton uses it handily to produce the imagery we imagine as kinky hair becomes "electric

fingers" (*GW* 167), or through the speaker who sees a "city/ of a woman" in the mirror (GW169). Clifton's nicknames for the uterus include "estrogen kitchen," "patient…sock" and "black bag of desire" (Q58). The inspiration of Clifton's mystical female relatives compels their own private realm of witty language. Some, in the poem "daughters" are "gaudy girls" and others are "fancy women," but all are descendants of a "wild witch gran" (*BL*11). There is also the bare sexuality of Clifton's "girl inside" an older woman. This secret girl is "randy as a wolf", yet also a "green tree" (*GW* 170). The pleasure involved here, confirmed by Clifton's admission that since childhood, she has "loved…the sound,.. the feeling of words in [her] mouth," is no coincidence (Holladay 182). With skillful rhetorical tuning, she orchestrates a pleasurably associative relationship between reader, speaker, words, and subject.

Virtuoso naming turns on wit, innovation and newness. Language styled this way becomes expansive and daring—and these points gain meaning, given its place in the oral tradition of African-Americans, people who have cultivated artful speech against physical and psychic curtailment. A poem that is written like speech induces two sensory elements at once: an aural and a visual element for its readers. When the words sparkle on the page, in the mouth, and to the ear, so do the subjects. Its startling imagery amplifies our appreciation of black women as subjects through detail. Because poetry is an associative communication, Clifton's efforts, then, expand the way readers realize black female subjectivity as vivid and concrete.

Clifton's approach to orality also shows her affinity for the occasional usage of black English modifications of the verb 'be' as a replacement for 'is' or 'are'. These turns, I emphasize, are infrequent. Not so surprisingly, they appear when Clifton undertakes subject matter related in some way to the African-American past. *The Terrible Stories (*1996) includes a poem titled "shadows." A vision unpeels in stanzas that invoke the name Memphis to braid together the Egyptian underworld, and the violent American south. These, in standard English, are broken by short vernacular refrains, each varying, like a blues song, from the original: "wake up girl/

you dreaming" (33). Whether two voices or one two-sided figure inhabit this poem, the vernacular voice takes the lead in defining the line between dream and reality. Amidst the poems of *Quilting,* written between 1987 and 1990, Clifton makes quite plain her theoretical stance on vernacular in "defending my tongue":

> what i be talking about
> can be said in this language
> only this tongue
> be the one that understands
> what i be talking about (*Q* 24)

Black English, in her early books, may have been encouraged by the proliferation of BAM poetry and issues. However, as the observation above confirms, Clifton does not view its concerns for subject matter or sensibility as only viable in the 1970s, when black identity in poetry last enjoyed more of a literary vogue.

Generally, these choices do not color the usage of the entire poem but their presence, to any degree, creates a range of specific inflections and attitudes. For example, looking back to "new bones", the vernacular of the line "we be splendid in new bones" appears nowhere else. However, this single line marks the speaker as black, a speech act which ignites volumes of subtext in those that follow: "other people think they know/ how long life is/ how strong life is. / we know" (*GW*118). The verb makes more specific the aim of Clifton's indirect "other people"; it sets off all sorts of signification as readers have to reevaluate the assurance that "we will leave these rainy days" offers early on, within a wide historical reach (*GW*118). The question of the speaker's identity shifts to the matter of number: is this an individual observation of a group, or a collective voice? What does it mean, in each case? Certainly, she forces a rethinking of the inferences in "new bones" to triangular trade, the commodification of black bodies, the

subsequent classic African-American folk sermon, "The Valley of the Dry Bones", and consider how, indeed, one defines words like strength or splendid (118).

With vernacular comes indirection, in "new bones" as well as "why some people be mad at me sometimes," a poem which exposes the issue of historiography that concerns this study: how herstory, in this case, can be shaped by its writer. Although it appears in Chapter One, this poem bears repeating as a prime example of indirection:

> they ask me to remember
> but they want me to remember
> their memories
> and i keep on remembering
> mine. (*NX* 20)

With this double-voiced strategy, Clifton names herself in terms of a specific Blackness, as conscious performer and performed, sustaining the African-American tradition of signifyin'. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., following Bakhtin, defines the "hidden or internal polemic" as "one speech act [which] determines the internal structure of another, the second affecting the 'voice' of the first by absence" (295). The application of vernacular speech to any of the poems cited above is the initial speech act. The refusal to accept a subject position or construction of race and gender which dismisses or erases one's context, such as that which black women have historically experienced, is the second, hidden one. In the case of "defending my tongue," the hidden polemic enables the speaker's self-definition as one who retains her linguistic options.

Clifton demonstrates at moments like this how her triumph of language for black women's world views echoes that of Hurston's Janie Crawford, after having held her own with the talk artists on her porch. Both style sparse, ironic imagery in what Roger Abrahams calls a "language of implication"; Janie's spate kills off her once-brash husband, while Clifton's poem essays African-American psychological and physical endurance (qtd. in Gates 288). Gates'

acknowledgement of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a "paradigmatic signifying text" also credits her with demonstrating how it empowers the voices of oppressed women (290). His point leads me to emphasize that these voices constitute a discourse of profound power to which Clifton's signifying contributes. She attacks the reiterating of history as written, digested, and perpetuated without regard for African-American existence.

"Black Semantics represents Black Americans' long-standing historical tendency to appropriate English for themselves and their purposes" Smitherman reminds us (58). This insight supports the complexity of Clifton's vernacular choices. Again, the sounding of an identifiably black speaker multiplies the effect of a poem designed to illuminate black female interiority. The vernacular of "what the mirror said" uses its particular language of origin to assert, redeem, and reinvigorate a perspective on black women that has largely gone unsaid. It takes, if you will, a postcolonial view with respect to their beauty. Rather than seeking a beauty on comparable or equal terms with whiteness, Clifton's vernacular *and* the scope of her references seeks an *alternative* measure. As with "new bones", the claim that "you a wonder" invokes a speaker and subject that changes the stakes and intensity of the message (*GW*169*)*. Dropping the verb entirely introduces a direct and unequivocal tone. It usurps, as it deflects, the "fairest of them all" mythology of the white female standard. This tone expands the implications and scope, repositioning beauty as something more powerful and capable than a certain quality of skin and hair. Clifton cites, in this way, a beauty black women have lived, if not known. Additionally, an affirmation in the culturally-grounded vernacular goes further toward undoing cycles of self-hate. Finally, Clifton trades on black traditions of performative speech to enhance the pleasure this woman generates; not only is she fabulous, but so is the language that describes her as well.

According to Smitherman, "[t]onal semantics," one of several "black modes of discourse" that she outlines, uses "voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning" (101, 134). The

subtlety and sound-based nature of this term makes it difficult, as Smitherman concedes, to represent. One of its more concrete manifestations comes through repetition. Clifton's approach to repetition is far more diffuse than the incantatory style that I have examined in relation to Sanchez. Musical patches of repeated lines and phrases occur in a way that can be interpreted as broken refrains, meaning that they surface in the poem with less of a pattern than, for example, conventional blues forms. Despite this, they function as refrains by re-articulating a given rhythm and idea that circulates throughout the poem. Clifton's tendency, as with vernacular, is to be spare; repetitive lines spread throughout poems. Their effect tends to somewhat reflect the black church tradition of witnessing: conveying an emphatic, periodic echo of agreement that follows a speaker's initial testimony.

Smitherman delineates the sacred and secular contexts of testifying: the sacred relates to stories which transform the tangible through contact with the intangible—"visions, prophetic experiences,…being saved" and attesting to "the power and goodness of God" (150). The secular gives an account of profoundly affecting experiences within the physical realm, supported by the senses—sex, death, and such. Thus, "[t]he content of testifying…is a communal reenactment of one's feelings and experiences" (150). Clifton is central to this study precisely because reenactment is central to poetry. When she evokes the world of black women's profoundly constructed "feelings and experiences" by performing it, she strikes deeply. Through repetition, Clifton's poems do testify, in order to name her beliefs, or hail her own evolving self-definition. The "homage to my hair," for example, repeats "black man;" her singling out of this group of individuals accents the emotional circumstances of her urgency (*GW* 169). In other words, the speaker knows her hair is extraordinary; what she wants is an amen, a ringing endorsement that she will be better comforted by hearing, a response to her call to savor black women. The positioning of "black man," alone on the line and repeated, makes an implicit testimony. Smitherman's description also applies where Clifton uses repetition like an echo. One poem

from her series about the goddess Kali, "she understands me," is a slow-moving confirmation of visions:

> it is all blood and breaking,
> blood and breaking. the thing
> drops out of its box squalling
> into the light. they are both squalling,
> animal and cage. (*GW* 117)

In this way, Clifton also repeats the joy of living, for she is one who has had to reassemble that joy after devastating illnesses and deaths. Just as Kali insists on having a visible presence, her poems repeatedly insist on representing black women's subjectivity. She repeats to situate and clarify what has so consistently been degraded and destroyed– their unique beauty, agency, honor, and the ferocity cultivated by their response to ongoing subjugation. In so doing, perhaps Clifton realizes that readers will need to be startled into recognition of these oppositional views by hearing the words again; they will not believe their ears the first time. She is aware, as much as Sanchez, of social responsibility, of art as activism, and of the need for alternative forms of knowledge in confronting hegemony.

However, Clifton's testimony is generally more private than the practices of Sanchez that I have discussed. A hush falls over her moments of repetition because she tends to position her speaker at less public proximity to others. Clifton's powerful accounts of survival are more likely to be epiphanic and pre-sermonic, whereas Sanchez, when testifyin', tends to place the reader in an assembly. When her speaker looks outward to offer her account of trial or joy, it is often to an individual, as in the "black man" alerted by "homage to my hair" (167). The first-person plural that Sanchez uses in "song no. 2" pares down to Clifton's mutable, lower-case singular. This singular testimony creates an intimacy with the reader; her call is more likely poised for an individual response, which Holladay speaks to in finding that "a Clifton poem has the

effervescence of unbidden thought" (63). Holladay also reminds us, importantly, that Clifton's 'i' works on many levels, and is indeed communal, ultimately creating a "composite identity" that "absorbs and reflects the surrounding world" (82). In other instances, she and Sanchez operate more similarly. Here I think of Sanchez's "To All Brothers From All Sisters", mentioned in Chapter Two, and Clifton's "poem to my uterus", where direct second-person address turns the testimony to a person or object. Clifton's predisposition clearly favors scant, concise moments of repetition over wavelike chant, but this is no strict binary. And remarkably, each poet produces an intensity of experience and witness.

Yet again, "homage to my hips" makes an offering to the discussion. We could speculate that Clifton opens with the line "these hips are big hips" as much for the sway and sass of its striding rhythm as for the assertion it makes. At line four, a variation returns, as in blues– "these hips/are free hips" (*GW* 168). She varies lines eleven and twelve also: "these hips are mighty hips/ these hips are magic hips" (168). Clifton approximates so closely the music of speech that this music can be elusive until the poem is read aloud. Once heard, its rhythm both arrests and centers the subject so distinctly that by the end of the line, the poem invites an image of the classic black female power pose: arms-akimbo, hands resting deliberately on the hips. The lines which follow—"they go where they want to go/ they do what they want to do" (168)– pop with the sort of bouncing drum beat that double-dutch mavens thrill to discover.

Repetition makes "4 daughters" a song of testimony. The poem inscribes a spiritual knowledge by gesture and metaphor that teeters between ontologies–discovered and sought, daughter and mother. In referencing how one's children cross the divide to adulthood, with the parent taking measure of the actions, The double repeating lines of the text, which follows in its entirety, roll out a conundrum of give and take:

> i am the sieve she strains from
> little by little
> everyday.

i am the rind
she is discarding.

i am the riddle
she is trying to answer

something is moving
in the water.
she is the hook.
i am the line. (*NX* 30)

Three of its four brief stanzas make a rhythmical assertion of self by the mother speaking the poem, one being "i am the rind" (30). Clifton balances that by repeating "she is" to describe the daughter. The rhyme is uneven, faint enough to almost overlook, making the poem like speech were it not for each stanza's repetitive first lines. The mother's subjectivity is under review, a status that threatens her own self-image and also destabilizes that of the daughter, even as the changes between them could rupture their bond. Clifton's short repetitions flash like a rapid gaze, shifting like a pendulum from daughter to mother. The "i am" lines tease at a cadence and rhyme that never materializes. The pacing emphasizes the symbiotic appearance of these two while the words confirm their dissonance.

Clifton's work resonates with Austin's finding that "the saying of…words" is the "performance of some internal spiritual act of which the words are…the report" (1432). However, the orality of a poetic text invites the possibility of a new term, the poenommic, an adjective that recognizes the existence of the powerful speech acts operating in a poem. It applies the African concept of Nommo, a dynamic speech layered with meaning (Ervin 2). This term seems apt as Clifton's poems construct and perform Blackness in ways that sustain black women's connections to and presence within African-American literary tradition. Virtuoso naming is Clifton's donation to a spiritual deficit lurking within women shut out by the sexism of the BAM and the racism of Second Wave feminism that abstractions, recovery, and movements alone do not resolve. Her insistent injection of vernacular continues their resistant speech and worldview, recalling and invoking their voices to acknowledge black women's active role in

rejecting oppression. These examples show us speakers whose poenommics are flagrant, folkloric, and full of agency. The poet behind them understands the drama of delicious speech within African-American culture and its instrumental nature. In "Relocating the Black Female Subject: The Landscape of the Body in the Poems of Lucille Clifton," Ajuan Mance expands on the poet's ear for effective, far-reaching language. The homage poems, for instance, "celebrate the capacity of the African American woman to transform and disrupt categories like masculinity and whiteness, whose visibility depends on the confinement or erasure of black female subjectivity, simply by reinscribing either or both of her constituent identities (blackness and womanhood) with new meaning" (133).

"[I] was [B]orn with [T]welve [F]ingers": Magic Heiresses[xii]

Clifton strives to maintain a dialogue throughout her career about the connective power all living things share. She recognizes this connection as a human responsibility. In those poems that acknowledge the spirit world and "the powerful memory of ghosts," Clifton attests to serving as a portal to this world (*GW*166). Clifton's own body has guided her adventures and contacts with immaterial realms, leading to many such poems that depict her in contemplation of her role as an heir to female magic and spiritual power. Holladay has observed that "her poems consistently argue for the special properties of the female spirit and body;" some indicate that "women, especially black women, possess an internal fortitude of mythic proportions" (65). However, Clifton increasingly describes more definitive forces at work. These connections to the unseen and her possession of knowledge from it preface and shape her life, and her poems. In interviews, Clifton often frames this knowledge as fact, based on experience, and over the past ten years has made increasing mention of it in public readings (Holladay 198). Her newest volume, *Voices* (2008) reckons with this aspect of her life. In previous works, such "spiritual kinds of experiences", as she calls them, wind through her poems across several collections, revealing her access to the realm of visions, and apparitions (Holladay 198). With

the publication of the Kali poems in *Two-Headed Woman*, Clifton begins alluding to her visions. Her acceptance of such beliefs, denigrated as superstition, at least, and folkways at best in Western culture, connects her experience with traditional African belief systems and worldviews.

My approach to this topic, as treated in Clifton's poems, interviews, and criticism, refrains from any judgment of this claim as valid and from a reading of this theme as purely metaphorical. I choose to regard it apart from Western notions of the rational, which have been used in the West to confirm black women as other, alien, primitive, and unstable. Instead, I see the claims of ephemeral consciousness, inscribed on Clifton's body through their embrace in her poems, as specialized knowledge that Black cultural studies scholars would validate, and also aligned with tendencies by feminist critics to read it as mythical. (Mance would be one.) Also, by linking her experience and body with the mystical, Clifton reflects a construction of identity that Stuart Hall calls a "politics of position"—that is, a construction based not on any absolute grasp of origins that cannot be recreated; rather, Hall observes that although "the past continues to speak to us," such a linkage arises "through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" ("Cultural Identity" 226). In this construction, while race is also a factor, given Clifton's recognition of their family's African lineage, she names gender as the primary aspect of identity defining her special knowledge. Through her blood ties, Clifton locates a genealogical link that explains this construction of self.

However, other black female bodies share this role of inheritor and house of spirits. A clutch of poems appear between 1980 and 1996 in which the black female body represents the power of this rich matrilineal inheritance. Elaborating on a physical sign of this legacy among women in her family, the first of these is "i was born with twelve fingers" (*Two-Headed Woman,* 1980), followed by "if our grandchild be a girl" (*Next, 1990*) and "daughters" (*The Book of Light,*

1996). Because it captures the knot of themes Clifton plays upon in the subsequent poems, I indulge the full text of the first:

i was born with twelve fingers
like my mother and my daughter.
each of us born wearing strange black gloves
extra baby fingers hanging over the sides of our cribs and
dipping into the milk.
somebody was afraid we would learn to cast spells
and our wonders were cut off
but they didn't understand
the powerful memory of ghosts. now
we take what we want
with invisible fingers
and we connect
my dead mother my live daughter and me
through our terrible shadowy hands. (*GW* 166)

Clifton locates acceptance, pleasure, and power in the witchyness and uncertainty that enters with the mention of black gloves. The word "gloves" stirs a curious elegance that converts the routinely negative connotations of black, regarding witches, skin, or otherwise. She continues with destabilizing imagery that binds nature and nurture: "extra baby fingers hanging over the sides of our cribs and /dipping into the milk" (166). How deliberate or casual is this act? Are they merely tasting the milk, or marking it with magic? The possibility of both is made strong by Clifton's neat linking of these exceptional babies to milk—an emblem of female reproductive power. As the object of a basic, intense hunger satisfied primarily by the mother's body, it is perhaps the clearest motivator for a baby's agency. Clifton and her late mother,

Thelma Sayles, the mothers of this poem, are black and witchy in their own right. Thus, the poet further enhances and legitimizes witch status, using the associative power of mother's milk and of inheritance; a live granddaughter extends the chain of women whose will cannot be readily observed or controlled. Clifton singular wish, in "if our grandchild be a girl", is that the awaited baby will have "twelve spiky fingers, symbols of our tribe…remembered from/ dahomean women/ wearing/ extravagant gloves" so that the line of fantastic bodies might continue, with the powerful myth, if not the fingers, intact (*NX* 34).

In a way that adds meaning to these potent images, Mance puts the matter of black women's power in play on a larger scale: "Since the mid-1970s, Clifton has used the language and imagery of myth to create portraits of the black female corpus that…undermine the system of sociopolitical hierarchies that perpetuates her invisibility" (125). Clifton, then, indirectly urges readers to reconsider the exchange of life-forces capable of passing through a black mother's body. That body becomes a house for spiritual presence and transactions of unforeseen power.

Further, this six-fingered image identifies black female bodies with the politics of position and opposition. The poem identifies a line of black women linked by blood whose subject position Clifton establishes as uniquely confident through birth. An outside figure, however, contests their position. What their bodies assert as a mark of power is a mark of fear for the unnamed "somebody" Clifton tell us "was afraid" these black witches "would learn to cast spells" and is implicated in the line, "our wonders were cut off" (166). She signifies that for this family of women who are marked all too obviously as The Other, the wonder and magic she attaches to their special hands translate as threats to the status quo. The fingers provoke fear and fear begets violence against them. This fact is a lesson their subjectivity, whether by race, gender, and/or their sixth fingers, teaches them to understand and oppose. Violence against the sixth finger, the most obvious sign of their unique bodies, marks "somebody" (a plural reference,

possibly to the attending doctors at each birth and other adherents to Western science) with an impotent grasp of the spiritual: "they didn't understand/the powerful memory of ghosts" (166).

This line keenly captures a critical issue for this chapter. Its subtext reveals the black female body as an ongoing site of remembered struggle and its capacity to repossess itself. Mance unpacks the subtlety with which Clifton alludes to black female power through mythic imagery. Mance finds that:

> [w]hen Clifton assigns to her black female subjects fantastic traits and mythical capabilities…their flagrant disregard for the roles that would limit their function and meaning challenges the positionality of those institutions and identity groups whose visibility depends on…the marginalizing system of binary relations (126).

In other words, Clifton clearly recognizes the poetry in this mythic, magical condition of the family women, and its power as well. The sixth finger makes them heiresses to a potent herstory of mystic power, its violent denial, and its lingering power through memory and reclamation. By telling the story of their powerful bodies, Mance shows us how Clifton recognizes power in black women's bodies that supersedes and overrides any legacy of abuse; they are, as they have been, participants in refuting hegemonic frameworks. Secondly, she adheres to her mission of "rememory"[xiii], which is both private and public—and therefore, of course, political (Morrison *Beloved* 36).

Open inclination to witness the unseen and testify to the unknown compounds the tangible evidence of spiritual power in extra fingers. Again, Clifton's family women dominate many poems that acknowledge the invisible. Her great-grandmother, who goes nameless, but not invisible, presides over "daughters". The Clifton persona who speaks inside the poem "daughters" traces her matrilineage as she addresses her great-grandmother. The poem

acknowledges the hereditary power of that matriarch, suppressed through the generations. The poet names her ancestor through the inheritance of qualities such as "the oddness in us,/…the arrow/ that pierced our plain skin/ and made us fancy women" in the family women, her "wild witch gran…, magic mama/and…gaudy girls" (*BL* 13). Clifton's poetry both observes power and acts out of it; her work in this vein rejects the familial silence and restores its discourse surrounding the ancestor they were "cautioned to forget" (*BL* 13). She prefers to claim and restore her lineage to a black female family member Carla Peterson defines as "eccentric…not centrally placed (according to the dominant system)" and possessing an "off-centeredness" that has "freedom of movement stemming from the lack of central control and hence new possibilities of difference conceived as empowering oddness" (xii).

Again, a formal feature upholds agency and testimony. Through the repetition– "i like to think/you are the oddness in us…/i like to think you gave us/extraordinary power" –of the phrase and the pronoun "you", Clifton exhumes the great-grandmother's power (*BL* 13). Hall's idea of positioning surfaces again also, as the definitive meter of "i like to think" insists a certainty about the doubly shadowy questions of family history and clairvoyance. The poet also emphasizes her own intellectual agency to speculate and choose the power which defines the family women.

Apart from her lineage, spiritual interactions appearing in Clifton's work that are trained on the poet alone often connect her body with loss. Death has dealt Clifton many direct blows. Her mother, Thelma, who frequently figures as a representative of tragically missed opportunity and emotional hunger, died at age 44. She is a widow who has lost two children and is now the oldest person in her family. She has managed to cheat death herself, having survived four bouts of cancer, and several other serious illnesses. Her awareness of herself as occupying a liminal state that gives her a view of the seen and the unseen permits Clifton to name her own body as a portal. An entire section of *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "From the Cadaver" attends to Clifton's

reckoning with cancer. Commonly, these poems reveal the body's relationship with itself through spiritual mediation. In other words, spiritual forces and knowledge deeply influence the body's engagement with itself.

Not surprisingly, suffering cancer and its aftermath cause body and spirit interact in ways that alter the speaker's sense of time and place. Written after Clifton's 2001 mastectomy , "scar" constructs a dialogue of negotiation about how her body is now to be named. The poem represents a truce, established between the speaker and her body, which serves as the site of a struggle for power. Relative to her twentieth century, post-enslavement status, such body traumas are private again. Centuries after the auction block, however, Clifton must recognize her body again. It serves as the site of negotiation and the bargaining table itself. Disease, the unseen spirit, has written itself into being, marked her body, and established a new challenge to subjectivity. Knowing her body's name is now 'we', rather than 'I', Clifton addresses the scar by setting out terms: "we will learn/to live together" and asserts "I will call you/ribbon of hunger" (*TS* 25). She understands power differently now. Not only is it something she wears in her hair or her bloodlines now– "and you/ what will you call me?"—but as a multivalent idea that compromises her grip on life. The scar gives Clifton her name in this new life– "woman I ride/who cannot throw me" (25)—and a new kind of ownership begins, very much a part of the present, in which the body brokers with itself, with the spirit and the intelligence named Lucille.

Ancient knowledge connects to the present through Clifton's body in "hag riding." Clifton visualizes her speaker's body moving, for emotional sustenance, between two imagined realms, past and the future. This is also a move between longing for comfort that a bond with Africa might produce, and excitement of moving forward, facing a destined adventure. She retains the link to Africa and the use of witch imagery alive that appear elsewhere. This poem moves from speculation –"maybe it is the afrikan in me/still trying to get home after all these years" to assertion—"galloping down the highway of my life/something hopeful rises in me" (*TS*

26). Energy and fullness surges upward as the poem accelerates through the speaker/poet's body, answering the spirit of hope with deliberate action: "i lob my fierce thigh high/over the rump of the day and honey/i ride i ride" (26).

These last lines endorse an erotic power for the speaker that is both sexual and spiritual. The usage here pairs with blues songs that reference sex as a ride. In blues culture, which I treat in Chapter Two, sex has its place as a positive, life-sustaining practice. In African-American folklore, spirits are known to "ride" the humans they inhabit; by that accord, the speaker is fantastically capable, perhaps only part human, a badassed female folk shero of a kind we have not sufficiently seen. And just as High John was a metonym for black survival, neither is this speaker necessarily singular; the pronoun, Clifton suggests, can be broadly read, particularly when power over the self is at stake (Holladay 184). Here is an eroticism Audre Lorde would endorse, which she locates on a "deeply female and spiritual plane" and defines as "power which rises from [women's] deepest and nonrational knowledge" (53). Clifton's speaker never questions that she remains tied to Africa, that it is still hers if she can reach it. Finally, its closing line repeats, confirming her faith in fully intangible things as she swings her leg over the day. She privileges the interior knowledge of her body, where the spirit lives, over any externally constructed logic. Kali also shadows this poem in its mention of ferocity. This word signals that powerful change is inevitable, but also that the body and its herstory answer it powerfully. Clifton's desire to live to a full and delicious exhaustion makes a strong connection between her body and her soul.

Spirituality clarifies yet another way in which this poet is a "situated knower" (Collins 19), able to look beyond the immediate and tally what lingers beneath. The truth-telling, testifying sense that the black female "I" brings to poems about the spirit world infers a willingness to ground the self in a place of mystery and intangible powers. It makes sense that black women might embrace the immaterial and find credence there. They know the weight of

trying to sustain bodies and voices that contain their true desires. Their lot in the material world emphasizes the need for alternate reinforcements.

FORM: "[T]he [P]owerful [M]emory of [G]hosts"[xiv]

I follow the treatment of myth and the intangible in Clifton's poems with a turn toward her use of form because I see an alliance between the two. Clifton cultivates a mythology of her twelve-fingered, African-descended female tribe, in part to reconnect its members to a power source located in their bodies. She shrinks the distance between Kali as idea, spirit, image, and human so closely as to merge them all, even if the fusion comes through struggle. Entwined in these mergers is an effort to construct knowledge in spaces where invisible and intangible energies collect. As she says of her tribe in the poem that defines this section, "we take what we want" (*GW* 166). What she wants, even insists on, is memory, and ghosts, certain that both have access to and missions within the tangible world. Why and how are the stuff of mystery, which does not bother the poet, as she finds that poetry is "about questions, not answers" (Holladay 194).

How does poetic form come into this exchange? Clifton poems routinely embody mystery in two visual features: routine use of lowercase type, including proper nouns and the first-person "I", with few exceptions, and more provocative still, with the insertion of white spaces that do not adhere to formal conventions. Each of these features draws attention, by the appearance of the poems, to their physical reality, and by that, to some meaning beyond words. Each has some role in the ensuing analysis, although I will focus on the white spaces, preferring to call them gaps. Both these formal features provide an opportunity to reflect on Clifton's devotion to justice and rebellion. Clifton's formal choices make these terms more than abstractions, themes, or subject matter; justice and rebellion motivate her ethical subtext and drive the visual performance of her poems as well. The subsequent mysteries that surface when we are faced

with these poems establish the possibility that black women can also be named by that which is absent and invisible.

Critics discussing Clifton tend to cleave to her techniques of compression and imagery, or to discuss the formal innovation of the memoir in *Generations*. Certain themes are popular, notably womanhood, the stages of motherhood, illness, and her interest in biblical figures, especially Lucifer. [xv] Admittedly, Clifton offers much to investigate, though Mance and Holladay, Agnieszka Tuzynska and Lisa Dunick make far more adventurous contributions to our understanding of the body in her work. Like most poets, Clifton is loathe to explain all aspects of her formal motives; thus, the news from interviews about these features is sparse to none, except for her insistence to Holladay that her lower-case usage does not stem from admiration for e.e. cummings (195). However, in writing perceptively about the poem "I am accused of tending to the past," Tuzynska's observation can be more broadly applied, taking us straight to the front row of Clifton's rebellious approach:

> The lowercase spelling of almost the entire text suggests the poem's departure from the rigidity of a page-oriented transmission, and its entrance into a more flexible realm of the spoken language…The orality in the poem is also implied by the refusal on the part of the text to yield to any of the traditional forms of poetry… The irregularity of line lengths points to the autonomy of the oral circulation of culture as self- regulating and unbound by the tradition of literacy. (para. 3)

I want to stretch Tuzynska's observation to offer an analogy. If we can imagine a poem's visual representation –not title, or form– as its name, its way of being, then Clifton's refusal to accede to traditional appearances may be read as bestowing a newer, freer name on her work. It takes its name-shape not from fixed particulars, but from its own precise arrangement of sounds. Such a choice would be consistent with an assurance Clifton grew up prizing in herself.

She talks of learning to be "name-proud" from her father, and, as her grandmother's namesake, prizing her legacy of resistance. Clifton, I argue, inherits the sense of agency and conscious disregard for ingrained hierarchy that we see in this equalized use of case. With that agency in place, she has cultivated a willingness to "balance…intellect and intuition" so that she can "serve the poem" (Holladay 191).

Clifton's subject position allows her to appreciate how that which we think of as the invisible has presence. She has a many-layered relationship with the unseen. As has been noted, the past, its stories, and its impact on the shape of her life hold great meaning. She has written numerous poems about her poet-mother, who relented, under pressure from her husband, to burn her poetry in the furnace, who went mad and died young. She walks with her mother's unrealized voice, and with the voice of the burned poems. The many deaths Clifton has weathered bring with them the undeniable immediacy of memory and ghosts.

Reinforcing this contact on a broader level, her curiosity about the lives of enslaved Africans, matched against the many things left unknown about them, has been generative for Clifton. She understands their invisibility as part of the "unspeakable" idea of race that Morrison assails and moves toward it. The second stanza of a poem titled "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, 1989" begins with her observation that "nobody mentioned slaves" and turns her address toward the unacknowledged presence: "yet the curious tools/ shine with your fingerprints" (*Q* 11). This rich absence leads her to invoke the ghost-lives who "did this work/ who had no guide" (11) and the poet pushes to break the seal on the unspeakable by calling out: "tell me your names/ foremothers, brothers/your dishonored names" (11). The gaps in access to knowledge, preceded by the gaps in human respect that endorsed slavery, come into the poem definitively in its last five lines:

here lies

here lies

here lies

here lies

hear

(*Q* 12)

The gaps here we can also think of ghosts, which in African-American folk culture have a place in the living world. These open spaces are not empty. These gaps give respectful acknowledgement to place and space. With them, and by extension, the entire poem, she recognizes the places where their lives, stories, and names existed. Form follows African-American culture in that Clifton accords physical space for a combined absence: that of the ghosts and that of her ability to access knowledge. In this way, the ghosts may still interact with the living. The names of the enslaved, so emblematic of the effort to dehumanize them, are important for Clifton as a matter of justice in the form of restored respect. Justice for ghosts with erased names drives the occasion of the poem itself, as Clifton visits the plantation to confront their experience. In the Walnut Grove poem, and its companion, "slave cabin, sotterly plantation, maryland, 1989," Holladay also cites Clifton's rebellion against the official narratives of U.S. history in her pursuit of justice and "contrast [of] the complex, frustratingly elusive identities …slaves formed for themselves with the superficial ones their oppressors imposed" (50).

But the gaps open up the question of what else is missing—language and knowledge to fit the Middle Passage, the nameless horrors that followed it for which words like bondage and chattel fall short, what remnants of that experience that extend into the present, and the magnitude of subtracted voices capable of inhabiting the imagination if we allow them. Reminiscent, in fact, of the black "ghost in the [American] machine" to which Morrison refers, the gaps evidence Clifton's mimetic effort to voice this discredited, if not unknown, experience

(377). In short, the history and herstory of black folk in the United States is rife with silences, suppressed memory, and ghosts.

Thinking back to Henderson, Clifton's gaps reflect, in a concrete way, on his mention of saturation as "the communication of 'Blackness' and fidelity to the observed or intuited truth of the Black Experience in the United States" (10). She refuses to dispense with the mysterious, the open questions, telling Charles Rowell that "[p]oetry, it seems to me…comes from intellect and intuition" (61). Seconding this refusal is an urgent sense of memory that, as a self-described "noticing sort of person" (62) drives many of her poems: "[I]f the last person who remembers is gone, what is left…of my mother? I must stay alive so that in a way my mother stays alive…It's important for me to remember that I never in my life have worked as hard as my mother did. Never" (58-65). Thirdly, in savoring her own take on her racial identity, Clifton wryly maintains that "I am a black person; everything I write is a black thing" (66). This remark can be read as signifyin' on BAM proponents' stated adherence to a Black Aesthetic *and* on Eurocentric literary critics and theorists who skirt racialized readings. It also demands some consideration of identity's deliberate place in her poetics, from which the gaps should not be isolated.

Conceivably, there are gasps, too, that Clifton urges us to "hear", even the horrific: those not simply pushed aside and unwritten but actively suppressed. The ultimate trigger for the Walnut Grove poem was Clifton's discovery that, among its inventory of possessions, black women were not listed at all. How did black women survive and contain the corrosive effects of such hegemonic injustice, which was made doubly so by the silence surrounding it? For example, it is, or by now should be, well known that during and post-enslavement, black women were among those who suffered rape in considerable numbers. These crimes were culturally normative and thus, the likelihood that they repeated without prosecution is high, as accounts by numerous scholars indicate (Giddings 33, 101, 204; Gray-White 59; Lerner, 155-159). What might the voices of those many women have expressed? How does U.S. culture as a whole, as

well as that which African-Americans sustain, encompass and accommodate the psychic energy surrounding generations of such loss, silence, and absence? In the interest of justice, I add here that my thinking on sexual exploitation and the horror in the gaps actually appears in Clifton's shapeshifter poems. One begins by asking "who is there to protect her/ from the hands of the father" (NX 78). These brave reflections on a more contemporary black female body under siege come from the poet's girlhood. The unspeakable horror, betrayal, desperation, and shame surrounding incest can be imaginably included in the gaps which answer the opening question:

not the windows which see and
say nothing not the moon
that awful eye not the woman
she will become with her
scarred tongue who who who the owl
laments into the evening who
will protect her this prettylittlegirl (78)

As Morrison reminds us, "invisible things are not necessarily 'not-there'…certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves, arrest us with intentionality and purpose" (378).

Another aspect of this reading is more tender. Through this lens, invisibility and perhaps some glints of horror combine with a resonance that tracks into the zone of the mind. Readers observe briefly the subject of "grown daughter" under the eye of her mother as speaker as they work together in the kitchen. In this classic zone of women's culture, comforts, and battles for supremacy, the archetypal notion of mother-daughter bonding dissipates. Typically Cliftonesque, its spare six lines and specific title promise swift and biting regard. The younger woman "peels in the opposite direction/without tears and promises/ different soup" (*NX*31). Contrasting earlier points, no virtuoso naming decorates her body. Of the mother's corporeality,

there is no concrete hint, only a range of potential gestures. The poet slices three times sharply and leaves us with the sound of the blade. The poem's terse language of "peels," "opposite," "without," and "different" establishes its themes of departure and alienation. The above line breaks snatch each subsequent phrase away from the status quo of a preceding noun. They signify a generational shift that stuns the mother/speaker. Clifton mixes that most unremarkably remarkable mystery— that things change–into this silence that echoes for the speaker. But the silences which stun the mother most and echo most strongly come when she ends the poem warily: she is "watching" the daughter and "learning to love her" but finally, finds herself so unhinged that she gasps: "who is she who is she who" (31). The gaps document her gasps, her wordless strain to process her deposed position of authority. These gaps stand in for the echo of images through the mother's mind, processing pictures of the girl who grew up and apart.

"[E]very [D]ay /[S]omething has [T]ried to [K]ill [M]e": Reflections[xvi]

If it was feasible or reasonable for a line of poetry to summarize the herstory of U.S. black women, it might be this one, from a title-less poem that goes by its first line—"won't you celebrate with me" (*BL* 25). Far more important is its recognition of a world circumscribed by black female identity. Far more important is its self-celebrating song of arrival that seeks a community, despite (and maybe because of) the "something" still lurking. Most important is its reach into and privilege of this world, a "private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness" that those of us "born in babylon/ nonwhite… woman" and working-class usually understand intimately (98).

Clifton's line recalls Leslie Marmon Silko's novel*, Ceremony*, which depicts a Native American idea that a ceremony is a protracted journey, enmeshing personal struggle and support in an ultimate healing. The poems included in this discussion offer some sense of the ceremony Clifton has steadily and deliberately been performing since 1969, in language put to

the service of the "dishonored names" black women received on the auction block. The matter and manner of healing the wounds of the auction block is significant and complex. Naming is a vital part of it, as her attention to the interior and exterior body makes clear. Although a short critical essay by Dunick holds that "Clifton moves to reclaim the body without allowing the female body to supersede the importance and voice of the woman herself," I contend that this is rather a moot point; her emphasis on body does not separate from voice, and vice versa (para. 4). Her engagement of subject, language, and form show how crucially Clifton understands that freedom and justice for one incorporates the other. Dunick does recognize, however, that Clifton's "speakers … call attention to the ways that corporality and a psychic sense of self inform one another" (para. 4). As the politics of the auction block have both personal and social meaning, Clifton's treatment of her own body and mind, voice and spirit, turn outward to a larger healing process. Her persistent "[challenge to] pejorative Western myths that define women and people of color as predatory and malevolent or vulnerable and impotent" recognizes how toxic those images have become for Western cultures and what they have cost black women collectively (1).

This naming ceremony is the work of a radical, womanist, black feminist warrior. As she endures, she create new archetypes that populate our literary and social consciousness and complicate black female subjectivity: the twelve-fingered seer; the rebel grandmother; the recorder of horrors; the spirit negotiator; the ferocious mother; the goddess sister; the hussy celebrator. Uninterested in simplistic renditions of the 'Strong Black Woman' archetype that reduce and damage as fully as Sapphire or Jezebel, Clifton teaches us instead about surfaces and substances, about the multiple ways that ideals and concepts may be performed as art.

This feature establishes any real or perceived gulf between Clifton and the BAM, moreso than ideology, subject matter, applications of style, or absence from the happenings that ignited and catalyzed it. The expressed concerns of Neal et al for affirmative art that spoke to African-

American communities about common issues, histories, and a renovated value system were not lacking in Clifton's work. Jocelyn Moody's biographical essay counts her alongside Baraka and Sanchez as "prominent Black Aesthetic poets consciously breaking with Eurocentric conventions" (para. 2). It is simply that the *stated* ideas and ideals of the BAM were, it turns out, only the beginning efforts to liberate constrained black voices and embrace black subjectivity through self-defined, self-determining manifestations of Blackness. Clifton's ideological substance led her to construct a new vision of Blackness– one that included a mother, wife, and college drop-out who did so *while* building a family and writing.

Clifton's self-defining and inclusive vision was shared by other poets, many of them women recognized within the BAM, like Sonia Sanchez. When Clarke, Harper, and other critics decry masculinism in that movement,[xvii] what they miss is that the gender struggles which ensued within the BAM for Sanchez, and undoubtedly occurred outside of it for Clifton, were pervasive.[xviii] They were one part of a massive cultural turn, a feature in the developing climate of resistance consciousness. Self-defining art among black women writers continued and flourished. Those struggles signaled that the BAM's advocacy of racial justice and agency, while sustaining sexual injustice and suppressing gender agency, would limit its potency and fuel Black feminism. The BAM's valuable progressive ideals for community-based art as a weapon of social change bogged down in patriarchal values unsuited to the actual challenges of the day and to the subversive positions black women have needed to cultivate.

This is the herstory of resistance by and voices of predecessors –Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Fannie Barrier-Williams, and more– that continues, despite counter-resistance from hegemony, patriarchy, sexism and racism that Collins recognizes as central to black feminist epistemology (98). This is the herstory into which Clifton's insistence on black women's visibility fits. Through her "unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language," black women proceed to smash the auction block

(Morrison 377). Theirs become self-possessed bodies and voices, engaging diverse, complex, and evolving lives, multidimensional women with names of their own.

CHAPTER FOUR

NAMING IS RENAMING: POETIC HERSTORY

> "Freeing yourself was one thing. Claiming ownership of that freed self was another."
> –Toni Morrison, *Beloved*[xix]

This chapter opens with a joint discussion of Sanchez and Clifton, treating some broader outcomes of the naming practices that Chapters Two and Three describe. This discussion will turn to include a trio of poets whose work, moving along similar lines, adds greater dimension to these dynamics and to Sanchez and Clifton's contributions. While the naming I have identified in their poems recognizes, affirms, and situates black women, and is noteworthy on that basis alone, it also generates a simultaneous action. Naming produces a transformation of imagery representing black women, which I consider a sort of renaming. In short, naming sets change in motion; by identifying the multidimensional people black women are, it also identifies what they are not. Conventional history has established a silence about this herstory that feminist herstories have usually sustained. Naming as I discuss it here makes clearer a herstory which privileges black women's actual desires rather than those constructed and projected onto them. They take initiative on behalf of themselves, as well as their families, communities, and beyond. They petition for justice, meditate on satisfaction, err and protect, heal and fail. Their demeaning and diminished representations, popular and literary, have accrued too much hegemonic authority to overlook the value of renaming.

My findings in this chapter speak to this renaming in two respects: as a connective thread, showing Sanchez and Clifton as exemplars for more recent women poets; secondly, as a feature I see resonant in the consciousness of these poets which also motivates the BAM. The following discussion illustrates how the cultural practice being performed by these poets is consequently renaming and rehistoricizing black women as whole human beings.

To begin this discussion of naming, identification, and historicization, I invoke a significant event. In 2002, Clifton and Sanchez shared a public reading and interview hosted by Cave Canem.[xx] Their exchange, marked by sisterly banter, poems, and storytelling, included observations about the forces driving their work and the perceptions that their writing has produced. Clifton observed that "[p]eople …are sometimes surprised that Sonia and I are such good friends because we don't write alike" (Davis 1066). Sanchez indicated that the respectful friendship they maintain defies attempts to keep them in opposing poetic categories (1066).

Here is another instance of black women's actions and desires constituting an oppositional experience. In this case, Sanchez and Clifton's choice of sisterhood puts a powerful stamp on their contemporary literary herstory as individual black, female, straight, American poets who refute outside notions of how they should (or rather shouldn't) regard each other. They have also added their own dimension to critical perceptions of how women poets negotiated the climate of the BAM. This study deliberately follows that lead in challenging the way male nationalists and white feminists overlooked black women's voices, the degree of critical attention paid to these poets, and the tendency to isolate poetry from political and social contexts. Sanchez and Clifton realize that herstorical initiatives by black women have often been dismissed or presumed upon by white and male cultures, and resist accordingly.

The disparity in Sanchez and Clifton's relationships to the BAM is a likely contributor to this notion that they share little common ground. In *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, a first in striving to comprehensively historicize the BAM, Smethurst asserts Sanchez's role within it. Following Lorenzo Thomas,[xxi] he recognizes her as an acclaimed and influential propagator of its artist-as-activist ideology and Black Studies curricula (58-59). Clifton goes without mention. Her 1998 interview with *Callaloo's* Charles Rowell cites her agreement with Smethurst's conclusion. She does indeed distinguish her artistic and political development from the organizations and very public circles which advanced the BAM.

She does, at Rowell's encouragement, recognize her conscious voicing of Blackness within the context of the late 1960s (Rowell 66). Thus, to consider her outside of it is to confer a structure onto what was a decentralized, varied, national response, a true *movement* in its fluid interpretations. More to the point, Clifton was not one of the core artists typically identified with the BAM; she manifested what I call a *BAM consciousness* (rather than direct involvement) by upholding its ideals of community activism and self-determination through the arts while remaining outside of its ideological and social circles.

Perhaps on this basis Clifton has been misperceived as less race-conscious, less radical and because of her spare style, simplistic. Clifton offers an angle on this issue which may underscore her distance from the BAM: "Particularly when I was first writing," she reveals in 2002, "African-American writers didn't…validate what I did because it did not seem to be political, forgetting what Gwendolyn Brooks said—that when she walked out her door, it was a political decision" (Davis 1066). By contrast, the more caustic poems amid Sanchez's early work and her overt links to the BAM have been used to judge her as perpetually militant and didactic (Glaser 313; Holladay 193; *Conversations* 85-87). Such appearances of dichotomy invite reductive perceptions of both poets: Clifton as apolitically maternal, and Sanchez, in turn, as utterly political, a deliverer of stark scenes and harsh manifestos.

Clifton's statement indicates that, like Sanchez, she was indeed part of the BAM's rupture of pervasive silences within African-American culture and literature. Their voices encouraged individuals and communities to affirm black identity and analyze daily life on political terms. By refuting a prescriptive notion of the black political poet, Clifton also models the sort of challenging speech that distinguished the movement. Further, the BAM renews a climate reminiscent of the early 1920s in which engagement with black subjectivity extends to the realm of women.[xxii] Within the movement and the wider consciousness BAM stood for, self-definition and self-determination for black people that rejects identity conferred and confined

by Western capitalist patriarchy were two of its principle issues of representation. Its underlying black nationalist spirit of defiance and resistance to Western hegemony on one hand, and affirmation of self, family, and community on the other, also link Sanchez and Clifton as poets who attend specifically (though not exclusively) to black women and their contexts. Poetry, written and spoken, figured prominently in cultivating a consciously black self-image. However, Sanchez and Clifton are among those whose work unites theory and praxis to insure that progressive black feminist voices have a place amidst the representation.

One of my interests in them stems from my own awareness that the pro-black stance coming out of the BAM and Black feminism are not always mutually exclusive, despite hostilities in both camps. Black nationalism, as Farah Jasmine Griffin confirms, covers a broad political spectrum (124). Using language to claim and shape their own roles, Sanchez and Clifton refuse Blackness without gender and vice-versa. Consequently, the BAM appears to set Clifton and Sanchez at opposite points only if we fail to examine *their manifestations* of its ideals within their attention to black women's lives. Ultimately, across styles, forms, and different types of activism, the BAM's construction and representation of a self-determined Blackness catalyzes a connection between these two that they carry forward in black feminist agency. The BAM encouraged the consciousness which these poets tuned in their own ways. These connections propel the regard for black women that my study strives to emphasize.

Sanchez and Clifton poems deepen these concerns by applying them directly to black women clearly, steadily, and over decades. They write in opposition to a nineteenth and twentieth century popular American culture that thrived on isolating and debasing the physical features of black women in advertising, on placards, and cartoons. The popular ceramic kitchenware bearing images of a Mammy that white Americans could accept—stout, coal-black, aproned and smiling–extended the reach of this mythology into American homes. These are encoded women, with the power to comfort, to accommodate others, to know when to slip back

into shadow once their usefulness ends, and the more devastating power to symbolize entrenched servitude. This reductive role, in its dehumanizing, defeminizing erasure of black women as multidimensional subjects, recognizes specific, static qualities. Indifferent to time, any black woman of any age would suffice. In reality, they are likely to find their lives choked, abused, and murdered by their presumed servitude to a system that has normalized such thinking. In other words, black women live in and shape history-herstory.

Popular culture too often stands ready to separate complexity from black female corporeality and temporality, linking it instead to stereotyped representation. We have the example of twenty-first century gangsta rap, whose video vixens supplant the nineteenth century's hypersexual Jezebel. If popular culture was powerless to direct and construct behavior, it would probably not be called culture and this point might simply be a rant. Real women, however, live lives imprinted by these reductive images as they seep into the void in public consciousness which culture feeds —be it popular, ethnic, or elite. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders discusses the trap laid by the long-lasting Mammy/Matriarch stereotype, one which also lives on in new forms (3). This image fosters the superficial perception of black women as useful servants, without regard for their cultural variations, roles, sexualities, and personalities, without regard for their human needs and desires without recognition of herstory.

As these stereotypes conflate popular mythology and real life, they obscure, and perhaps dispel, the space black women need to acknowledge and process what they feel about themselves and their place in the world. That needed space may be physical but is also definitively psychological and emotional. Sanchez and Clifton are among those writing who have made considerable inroads in self-definition; however, the literary treatment of black women's interiority, their emotional lives, remains underdeveloped. As this task goes forward, it is important to clarify that for the writers I discuss, self-definition is not exclusive valorization.

Rather, these women write from a knowledge suppressed by the larger culture, knowledge that counters constructions designed to ensure their voicelessness and domination.

My discussions of Sanchez and Clifton's poems in Chapters Two and Three respectively, move into a larger context with these issues of representation, a concept that connects the study to feminist, Black cultural studies, and postcolonial ideas especially. Representation pervades each of these theoretical areas as a commonly- critiqued feature within the hegemonic control of discourse. The Oxford English Dictionary clarifies representation as a concept: writing that links these disciplines to the poets' work. The voicing and imagery I find in those poems yields some "likeness, or reproduction in some manner" of black women's lived experience; their formal tendencies– namely Sanchez's use of the slash, Clifton's ghostly gaps, and the repetition both employ –establish the "fact of expressing or denoting" the emotional states of their black female speakers "by means of a figure or symbol" (online sec. 2a, 2d). The previous chapters have also treated Sanchez and Clifton's poems as ways to "[present] to the mind or imagination… a clearly conceived idea or concept": that of writing that names the black female body and voice (sec. 6a). The poets strive collectively on behalf of black women by "placing a fact… before … others by means of discourse" in order to … influence opinion or action" (sec. 4a). By departing from the stereotypical representations I describe—hegemonic "configurations of power" in Said's terms– Sanchez and Clifton write toward the destruction of any lingering effect of the auction block on the black female body and psyche (89). The black feminist discourse embedded in their poems is one that uses literary means to claims and define an existential space for the wide range of black women's lived experiences.

The stakes of a change in representation to black women involved in a BAM consciousness were high. Their endorsement of this spirit was buoyed by several things: the potential for an upgraded validation of their worth as individuals, as partners in relationship with black men, and as very real and pivotal community builders. The affirmative, cohesive

energy of fusing art and social change enlarged the cultural dimensions of these hopes. That hope was born of personal and collective desires by black women for imagery and language that would dismantle the impact of their stereotypical representation. This might seem to have been a certainty, given the explosive advent of black nationalist, feminist, and black feminist/womanist ideologies in American culture. It is vital to note the pace of actual change. Hegemonic gender constructs thrived within the climate of that time, as the above reference to gender politics by Bambara indicates. Cheryl Clarke and Robin D.G. Kelley offer us some clarity about to the conflicts and issues surrounding black women, torn between black nationalist and feminist ideals, politics, and personal lives stamped with deep simultaneous knowledge of both issues for which neither faction allowed. Struggles by black women within the BAM, these scholars indicate, to voice and distinguish their concerns were ongoing (83-85; 141-144). Their ideas of a self that decides and defines its subjectivity might inevitably be defined differently than black men or white women. Neal's writings on the tenets of the movement, such as the BAM's "radical reordering" of the roles of art and artist generally leave room for the potential inclusion of these differences ("The Black Arts Movement" 66). Speaking for BAM activists, he cites "black people" as "[t]he primary focus of our emotional energies" ("New Space" 132). At other (though fewer) points, he seems barely to recognize black women other than to imply their inclusion under the male pronoun.[xxiii] Ultimately, however, the BAM's emphasis on restoring manhood and building racial unity outweighed gender. Pollard attests that during the BAM "many black women poets give voice to the ambivalent power dynamic that exists in the black community, envisioning new imaginative spaces for black women to occupy in relation to their 'brothers' " (178). Neal does write that the "sense of a haven of blackness" he saw developing within the BAM was "found most often in the poetry," where women did also raise their views ("Shine" 15). Sanchez and Clifton's work and Clarke's study of BAM women's poetry point to the value and the need for more such exploration of their representations and views. Some of those

ongoing hopes, desires, and possibilities encouraged by the BAM's self-determining Blackness continue to surface in Clifton and Sanchez's later work and that of the "furious flower[s]" who follow them (Brooks 456).

Sanchez and Clifton's poetry then, is noteworthy for its contributions in this respect and beyond, issues they have shaped and voiced also appear in the work of younger poets. In this chapter, I will also argue that their BAM-influenced representation of black women have helped shape a lineage of black feminist poetry, a proper herstory. I find indications of lineage in the work of Nikky Finney, Patricia Smith, and Elizabeth Alexander. Despite numerous differences in style and approach, these three younger poets display a particular, ongoing concern that links them to their elders. Their poetry shares some of the consciousness of the BAM– particularly that of its women poets– if not full adherence to the ideology. Their poetry also names black women specifically. They each engage self-definition and identity construction as issues meaningful on individual, but also collective, bases. Finally, their representations of black women include, but exceed, the external; they also name interior experience. On the whole, then, I find that each of the poets produces an emotional herstory of black women in certain respects. By this term emotional history I mean a narrative, whether fragmented or concentrated, using textual or subtextual detail, that accentuates interior feeling, mood, and/or attitude within a female group or culture.

My discussion illustrates how the cultural practice being performed by these poets are consequently renaming and rehistoricizing black women as whole human beings. Following an introduction to the work of Finney, Smith and Alexander below, I will return to these aspects of representation and to evidence of emotional herstory in all of the poets' work.

Empowered "Furious Flowers"[xxiv]

The 1970s arrived with cultural shifts for the subjects under examination here. This was a decade when the BAM is generally believed to have ended, and in some senses, that is true. Funding of artistic enterprises by and for African-American communities met with politically destabilizing options and the blunt absence of black philanthropy. The BAM's key concept of consciously political art was ruptured by government intervention[xxv]. Differences in priorities and strategies for the movement heightened. The ideological debates compelled by its theorizing had by this time provoked increasingly outright challenge, assault, and dismissal from numerous voices, notably feminists/womanists and the gay/lesbian community. Nationally, anti-Vietnam protest prior to the troop withdrawal eclipsed all these debates to some degree. Even on a surface level, the high visibility black consciousness attracted in popular culture had waned in some quarters and degenerated to blaxploitation films in others. The advent of Black feminism and the combined dynamics of race and gender had only just come into discussion. Black women fiction writers' long-running domination of popular and critical attention had begun; by the end of the 1970s, the classic texts of black feminist criticism had found their way to print. Poetry by and about black women, however, remained a needed entity among those still seeking to read and write it.

Clifton and Sanchez were among those whose sustained expressions of "loving [B]lackness" beyond the BAM period set precedents for younger poets—in this study, Nikky Finney, Patricia Smith, and Elizabeth Alexander – as they engaged its ideas of representation (hooks 20). Each poet emerged between the mid-1980s and 1990, a significant period of change in contemporary American poetry. Formalism launched a challenge to the long post-war reign of free verse. Postmodern forms propagated by L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets gained a contentious visibility within literary discussions and, gradually, creative writing programs. By 1990, a bar-and-coffeeshop poetry culture had also resurfaced, based in urban areas but reaching outward.

Defiantly and deliberately, slam poetry situated itself outside of the academy –a new incarnation of BAM practices for which credit would be long in coming. It proliferated as a multicultural, urban championing of orality, and introduced an overtly competitive aspect that shocks the standard readership. What occurred for black (and other) poets who develop after the BAM was a far greater openness to their work on the page and their voices onstage for which the BAM broke ground (Thomas 223-225). This atmosphere of vibrant and mixed cultural imperatives was typical of the post-BAM environment in which younger black women poets would read, write, and regard the example of Sanchez and Clifton. They, and the younger poets emerging at this time, made clear by the poetry they generated that the need for writing black women's herstory of concerns and experiences had not passed; it had barely been addressed.

To succeed in publishing as a black woman after the 1970s was more normative and imaginable because of barriers the BAM and black women's fiction exploded. In another sense, this same reality may have caused new challenges for poets, as fiction and drama, to some extent, eclipsed the prominence the BAM brought to poetry. Finney, Smith, and Alexander were subject to these influences on subject matter, form, and orality. They wrote within a social and political context richly nourished by the climate that preceded them and informed by the one which accompanied them. The place of race in American literary conversations, by this point, became more complex. Identity was a more open question increasingly contested on the basis of sexuality, binary notions of gender, and class; yet for some, namely a New Formalist faction of American poets, it was again a closed matter, reminiscent of the New Critical period. However, the younger poets I address here, revealed in their poems a keen engagement with African-American culture, multiple fields of identity, and socio-political consciousness. All these elements tied them to Clifton and Sanchez.

Even with these ties to their predecessors, for Finney, Smith, and Alexander, orality and form reflect decided shifts. Their own aesthetics and voicing of black female positionality play

out differently. For example, traditional African-American vernaculars, urban and rural, do not find nearly as regular a place in their work as Clifton's, for instance. Nevertheless, I recognize among them what could be called a vernacular *consciousness*: decidedly critical, oppositional, and culturally informed by the knowledge Smitherman describes as part of "Black semantics" and modes of discourse (101). For example, they signify their attachment to transmigrational vernacular culture with references to cornbread, to High John the Conqueror, and the Supremes. Smith and Alexander are most likely to balance this by dropping the occasional urban slang term, momentarily raising the level of performative speech. Also, Finney's very southern way of casually hailing and inviting extended family members into her detailed narratives strikes me as a vernacular gesture.

The Afro-Modernist influences of surrealism and jazz on Clifton and Sanchez are also less apparent. The willingness I noted by Sanchez –which appears also in Clifton's "hag riding" –to elide time and collapse distance between places in poetic narratives is of less interest to this group. Each tends to plant her speakers in realist, contemporary space. Alexander is the most frequent traveler into surrealist and abstract realms and Smith, possibly the least. Their formal choices invite a conversation about the insurgent possibilities of fixed and open forms that engage the precedents Sanchez and Clifton have set. Alexander's deft handling of the sonnet produces tonal shifts different from Smith's street-corner-testimony; both stand apart from Finney's tumbling visual tales. However, each poet is similarly unapologetic about her rich and regular attention to naming black women as subjects and enlarging their emotional herstories through various approaches; these features, I claim, have depended strongly on Sanchez and Clifton's existence, if not their example, a point I will develop further on in this chapter.

Writers often become writers because of writers. For Nikky Finney, it was Lorraine Hansberry's words that drew from her "some of the deepest breaths of [her] girlhood" at fifteen, when she witnessed a performance of "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black." In a short memoir,

Finney reveals, "I learned as a girl there were indeed two sides to every story. More and more I knew that I wanted to be one of those telling and passing on the infinite sweet dark side" ("Pencil" 219). Finney followed her desire to a meeting with Nikki Giovanni, an apprenticeship with Toni Cade Bambara, and to her first book, *On Wings Made of Gauze,* published in 1985. After the poems of *Rice* (1995) and a short story collection, *Heartwood* (1998), Finney published her most recent volume, *The World Is Round* in 2003, in which the poems I discuss appear.

Growing up during the Civil Rights period as the daughter of the only African-American attorney in a South Carolina town and going on to claim her lesbian identity has crystallized the idea of intersectionality in Finney's poetry. Race, gender, class, sexuality and culture inscribe an unavoidably strong consciousness of place on the poet; it is conceivable that she has spent her life evaluating, calibrating, and rediscovering what place means for her. In fact, this idea radiates through her body of work.

This knowledge–which location extends far beyond the physical to the social– is part of Finney's inheritance from BAM poets. The black women poets who precede her, and who certainly include, but are not limited to Clifton and Sanchez, insist on writing without choosing between their racial and gender identities. Her work indicates that Finney understands that these poets have activated her access to self-awareness, an access that she has been granted by virtue of her place on the timeline. Grounded by acceptance of her positionality, she writes through it, rather than around it or beyond it.

Themes of the South as a site of origins and the past, and family as a bridge to an expanded self frequently dominate her work. She gives honor to home, to elders, and to the past and its intricate web of situations that make all else possible. This understanding extends to her perspective on cultural space as regional; she usually contextualizes black people in the community of the South. There is "red velvet rice" and "black snakes… tunneling under the hay", "homemade cotton sheets" and "bombs… wrapped in Black churches" (8-9). Sweeping

portraiture is a common feature of Finney poems that characterize her definition of home. That definition is closely intertwined with family. She describes "mean aunt Nina,/ who won' t die" and "Uncle Billy," who "will only / drive a car if it's long and pretty" (18, 6). Imagery from the natural world serves to capture the value of the past, whether childhood locales or her birthplace near the Atlantic, with its reminder of slavery. Issues of justice and injustice, culture and blood ties, familiarity and alienation, love and power are inevitable for a poet with Finney's personal influences. Like Clifton, her poems tend to rise from personal realms and her "I" encourages readers to hear the poet through the persona. However, Finney is more interested in undertaking a journalistic role to write into existence the complex beauty she sees in others. Those others are often decidedly black and familiar to her in some way. She rarely stands alone as autobiographical subject. Women occupy a particular place; Finney's introspective voice is more likely to turn revelatory through her attention to another female subject.

A BAM consciousness also presents itself in Finney's ready affiliation with community. If this seems odd, given the BAM's association with homophobia, again, I emphasize a *consciousness* here rather than a direct ideological embrace. While the scope of Finney's community is likely to be, ideologically and practically, more expansive, it may be that, for this poet, her first community is her most compelling one . Her tendency is to place subjects and issues within this framework, whether that means family by blood or by common struggle. Finney may focus on an exceptional individual in that community, or on folk culture itself in her validation of the ordinary. The mission of the BAM that Neal describes, that of making art that validates and directs itself to Black people, plays out unapologetically in Finney's work ("The Black Arts Movement" 62).

Finney locates her poems in some way and builds small moments of ordinary life from the setting. This remains so even when she tackles identity directly, as when the question at stake is where one may safely be gay or lesbian. The poems invariably slide away from their

occasion to include a larger critique or observation. They often return to powerful visual moments, evidence of Finney's documentary tendency. Her use of the sensory elevates her concern for subject matter. The establishment of a clear, deep impression of subject matter and speaker is her prime concern. "[T]he heart, the core of the experience," writes poet-critic Kwame Dawes, is what Finney "seeks to discover" (269).

"Sex" is an important poem which enacts all elements that drive this study—the naming of black women's bodies, herstories, and emotions—within a less-discussed sexual context. Despite her frequent embrace of family and community, Finney's speaker stands apart from the group in this case to express and preserve her self-respect and dignity, choosing to love that about herself which her loved ones reject. This is an occasional poem of a different sort, as revealed by its subtitle: "After being told, 'Oh, what would you know about it anyway'" (*The World* 84). Its lesbian speaker launches a third-person reflection in which she parses the emotional lining of the remark (84). She is forced to conclude that her mother has named her daughter's "body/ coming together with another/ woman's a fake freak of nature,/ not sex or love and could never be"(84).

Finney's speaker is compelled to do her own naming; she uses diction to establish parallels. A "blistering ash" links destructive heat to the mother's judgment, which, "proclaimed/ to the rest of the family", constitutes a "branding" (84). These words are volcanic, suggesting that such views derive from a hurtful fire-and-brimstone theology. The mother's gaze is a "sermon" (84). Finney conveys situations free of such hurt with more mutable imagery. Sexuality is likened to cooking with a variety of spices. Pleasure takes the fluidity of a "hot springs geyser" or a "gulf stream" (85-86). The stanzas proceed with a more steadily rhythmic stroke than usual for Finney; each exhibits its single example of how a woman's body loves. The poet invites corporeality, calling out the "cerebellum," "thigh tissue," and "lung sacs," perhaps to underscore how totally and universally sex affects the entire body. She turns to precise, natural

creations, a “diamond,” and a “desert orchid,” to claim the speaker’s right to these beautiful feelings. “[T]hat intricate and complicated vessel” that the speaker understands as human desire and satisfaction is thus rendered normative in her body. In the course of this declaration of sexual difference, Finney binds together loving self-regard with a fierce self-determination to stand free of the mother’s value system. She sustains this stance to the poem’s close.

A precedent occurs in the political subtext of “Sex” and its multiple representations of power. Its self-defining speaker affirms her identity as she confronts, at close range, a system of cultural power that sees itself as hegemonic. The system she faces, which has sought to control by naming and ostracizing, sorting and limiting as hegemonies do, is represented by her mother, otherwise a signifier of emotional power and cultural validation. In the African-American context of an oppressed people this figure might, ideally, be expected to endorse the speaker’s self-determination, but the poem reveals the intersection of race, gender and sexuality as a site that may engage the dynamics of self-definition in disruptive (and eventually, productive) ways for its speaker. This poem models the advocacy against oppressive value systems that spread from the BAM (and the Civil Rights movement) to influence the struggles of feminist and gay/lesbian rights movements. These are beliefs Sanchez and Clifton have insisted upon across their careers, and Lorde’s influence on these lines is present as well. Ironically, homophobia as explicitly expressed within the BAM obscures this genealogy of resistance.

At a glance, claiming any linkage between the homoeroticism/sexuality Finney bears witness to and the overtly heterosexual BAM seems grossly erroneous. However, I do see a progression in the broaching of sexuality by Sanchez and Clifton. They have written a self-defined sexuality, leaning –in spirit, if not in form– on the precedents of blueswomen who precede them. Their willingness to name black female sexual agency, even if that means heterosexual in their cases, provides subsequent writers like Finney greater precedent to enter, respond to, and diversify the conversation. Membership in a broader gay/lesbian community

does not inhibit Finney's overtly positive regard for black identity, and in this she is noteworthy. Her stance is also a gift younger writers have inherited from poets of BAM consciousness – namely Sanchez and Clifton– but also, always, Lorde, who confronted the BAM's homophobia directly. Finney accentuates the burgeoning presence of black women poets coming of age, artists whose refusal to homogenize themselves or privilege one aspect of identity over another reflects increasing accommodation of black women's diverse subjectivity.

Patricia Smith's second career (she was initially a journalist) began at the birthplace of slam poetry, the Green Mill Lounge in Chicago, and she was its midwife. She went on to win four National Poetry Slam championships and to defy the binaries of page versus stage, academic or street poet that constrain the genre today. Debates over the merits of so-called performance poetry that sprung from the slam scene have followed Smith into print, where some of her early autobiographical poems appeared in *Life According to Motown* (1991). Smith has also become known within and beyond the academy for a wildly diverse array of persona poems that include Medusa, a white supremacist killer, Little Richard, and a dead woman's corpse in the morgue. En route to a National Book Award nomination in 2008 for *Blood Dazzler*, which personifies Hurricane Katrina and some of its victims, Smith produced three other books. *Big Towns, Big Talk* (1992) gives what is often a black female, heterosexual, and working-class view of urban adult life; *Close to Death* (1993) devotes itself entirely to the lives and voices of black males; and *Teahouse of the Almighty* (2006) the poems sing the blues of search and satisfaction.

Smith's imagery goes directly toward embodying the working-class community that BAM theorists targeted as the generators of proactive, pro-black values**.** Rather than pronounce those values in pedantic ways, Smith expresses them in imagery and language that gives close attention and honor to the daily lives of her subjects and to the urban culture in which she renders them. However, Smith also seems to train her gaze more on this community's immediacy than to posit its role in a liberated future. She does not pronounce to, for, or even

with, any definition of a black community. Ideology comes through her creative choices and personal delivery rather than through pronouncements. Her representation of Blackness encodes validation within the fallible human qualities and cultural gifts of those masses.

Smith takes seriously the BAM tradition of poetry in public performance to which Hughes, Thomas, Brown, and Sanchez attest.[xxvi] The fact that her early readings occurred in a bar, forming a trend which thrived outside of academia, befits that tradition. Her poetics rework a swaggering, effusive oral style that, of the three poets I feature here, pays most direct homage to the orality of BAM poetry. She also places the strongest emphasis on urban vernaculars, although her frequent use of persona determines her choices about diction. The transmigrational speech of Alabama and Chicago forms a rich percentage of Smith's linguistic sediment. When her speaker is grounded in a black female body, that speech is ever more likely to emerge. The late Gwendolyn Brooks did her fellow Chicagoan the honor of a blurb the back cover of Smith's second book, *Big Towns, Big Talk* (1992), calling the poems "direct, colloquial, inclusive, adventuresome" (*BTBT,* jacket copy). Brooks thus alludes to the most pivotal word of that title, and of Smith's corpus: talk. To state that Smith's poems are deeply embedded in Nommo, the African belief in power through the word seems inadequate. "[T]he the most important thing is the story and the telling of the story," Smith tells Craig Morgan Teicher in a 2009 interview (para.1). Her use of "and" is pivotal to the Nommo of the statement. One feature is not subordinate to the other. The telling *is* the story, as equally as its rising actions, dialogue or context.

Typical of the pronounced orality that Smith helped restore to poetry are her compelling first-person recitations. Lyrical cadences in these works perform a deliberate vernacular consciousness. In tandem with her inheritance of oral traditions, Smith's craft also reveals her debt to music. As the indulged only child of a father who loved the blues and a mother bound to the church, Smith spent her mid-1960s adolescence under the sway of Motown. These

influences rise immediately and consistently, making a Smith poem recognizable. Her dramatic monologues sustain and extend the African-American secular sermon, celebrating "talk… plump with Mississippi juice" and "West Coast snarl, /…/ words that shoulda been songs" (70-71). Crisp phrasing of alliteration, assonance, and consonance marry direct narratives and startling subject matter. These technical choices help to explain her power onstage. We can read in them the stylistic urban testimony and compelling performativity that link her to Sanchez. They also speak to the politics of asserting a black woman's account of black urbanity for which Clifton and Sanchez have set a precedent.

The "adventure" Brooks mentions in describing Smith's work is an adventure in people. Using the individual story and its influences, Smith's thematic range draws the hard and imagined edges of the world down to the doorstep. When her black female speaker moves in tune with the poet, she looks inward as well as down. Bodies have a primacy. Hips and mouths and skin hold sway; dancing happens frequently. The voice is tough and self-aware. The potent mixing of music and sex is also a recurring theme, one that evokes both risk and pleasure. Temptation and danger, whether physical or psychological, attract her as subjects. She enjoys diving into emotional dramas to root out suppressed points of view and locate motives. The unconflicted voice of a mistress in "Your Man," follows Clifton's explorations of the 'bad' woman. Boundaries matter; Smith is as interested in freedom as in its inevitable constraints, and she reports from both sides. "Heartland," for example, most likely drawn from her past, exposes the thinking of a dark-skinned black woman at a "sullen truck stop just east of Advance, Ind." whose husband is white (24). The speaker/persona interprets her silent profiling as a prostitute, conveyed by four white gawkers: "They all agree I'm in it for the cash" (25). The discomfort forces her to wonder if her progressive spouse "has ever worn his bones on the outside" (25).

Smith's journalist's training, experience, and instincts remain evident; thus, she takes on poetry with a provocative curiosity as to how people transform, or resist change. In persona poems she is driven to investigate questions, expose possibilities: what kind of woman *might* Medusa have been, on her own terms? This is also true of the autobiographical turns that Smith includes and attests to in her poems. This idea that transformation becomes more possible by looking more deeply into one's black identity, present and past, is one that the BAM expressed and one which compelled many a poet. As grounds for testimony, it points up the frequent presence of personal herstory in Smith's work. It also strikes me as a theme that recurs for Sanchez. Baker makes an observation about Sanchez that could reasonably apply to Smith's approach to voice and subject: "The single speaker puts into forceful language the wisdom of the tribe, stripping away pretense and … colloquially exorcising demons of racism, sexism, and intraracial dissension" (332). In other words, both poets 'get real' in ways that brought Sanchez and others some of their harshest criticisms during the BAM. They use speech and content that sustains the poet's role as truth teller and performs its community service by translating what occurs outside 'the veil'. Most importantly, black women gain visibility and dimension as speakers.

There is more to Smith's ownership of detailed witness than indulgence: a black woman seeks her soulmate on a dance floor in "Changing Partners;" relives her climb to a blackness she can love in "Blonde White Women;" recalls her beautiful young son's sudden thuggish turn in "Biting Back." Smith's even, searching tone expresses honest moments of human experience in which she enlists her reader. These moments are enriched by, and incorporated into, her *particular* identity as a black woman. The poet offers such moments as a way of puzzling their meaning collectively that is reminiscent of Clifton. I read a dual concern here. Smith seeks to increase and reinforce literary space for lived experiences among black women that resonates

with them and affirms the unspoken in their lives. Equally, she hopes for an emotional solidarity on a human basis that carries readers/listeners beyond the impulse to locate an Other.

Smith privileges a recurring figure, Annie Pearl Smith, in the poems from *Big Towns, Big Talk*. The section, "My Mama Done Told Me," contains some poems reflecting the life lessons its Black woman speaker/persona learns by observing Annie Pearl. The section begins with "Annie Pearl Smith Discovers Moonlight." We see Annie Pearl through the eyes of her daughter, but hear her also, and the poem turns on her speech. Annie Pearl is a black, working-class, church woman who clings to the values she watches being crushed asunder, whose emotional sustenance runs thin, who has suffered too much and too long. She has been presumed upon much, lied to too often. Smith finds a conceit that makes these emotions tangible. When the moon landing occurs in 1969, "a year fat with deceit," Annie Pearl's reaction is surly disbelief (3). Husband and daughter watch her "pout … and sniff… /and slam… skillets into the sink," navigating her anger with shaken faith that "The Lord woulda showed Hisself if them men/ done punched a hole in my heaven" (3-4).

Simply by calling this subject by her full name and centering her in this portrait, Smith performs a significant naming gesture. The full attention its length and form pays to Annie Pearl also leans toward a gesture of naming. At eight stanzas, two and a half pages, this narrative poem is typical of Smith; the poet takes time to establish a conceit and build a context around Annie Pearl's significant gestures. Its streams, stops, and turns hinge on the physical motions, the emphatic pauses, and so the form is organic. As she faces middle age, Annie Pearl's last field of hope is a vision of heaven now under assault; even her family doubts her skeptic view of science and power over faith. She does not swallow it with a passive voice or gesture. When her prayer in the moonlight ends the poem, Smith puts Annie Pearl's interior world, both fragile and furious, on display.

Last and youngest of this newer generation is Elizabeth Alexander, whose first book alone underscores how much poetry surrounds and develops black women's emotional lives. In 1990, she injected the name of Saartjie Baartman (mentioned above) into literary discussions as it probably had never been before with the publication of *The Venus Hottentot*. Baartman was a twenty-year-old South African woman named, caged, and displayed "as an animal" to the European community" from 1810 to 1815 and finally, subjected to pseudo-scientific experiments by anatomist Georges Leopold Cuvier in Paris. Once she died, Cuvier dissected her and placed her preserved genitalia on exhibit in a jar (Guy-Sheftall 18). Alexander's book may have drawn critical attention initially on account of its provocative subject and her tutelage with Nobel winner Derek Walcott; in any case, the young poet's own technical merit also earned high praise as evidence of a reinvigorated formalism (The jacket copy includes blurbs from *People* and *The New York Times Book Review*, the latter of which finds it "intellectual magic" [*VH* back cover]). To critics who tend to be steady BAM detractors, Alexander's deft construction of sonnets, overt attention to meter, and other tools may have seemed like the "destruction of the [black] thing" to reverse Neal's stated BAM direction, a literary turn away from any trace of black nationalism ("The Black Arts Movement" 64).

Alexander's contribution is significant on several levels that are important here. Her engagement with how a black woman's body affects her subjectivity provides a textual field on which black feminist issues of representation and objectification connect with poetry as I discuss it here. Some related issues, namely skin color and gender hegemony, black female sexual mythology, and constructions of black humanity as varied in worth, emerge as Alexander discusses Baartman's public display and experimentation in a 1996 interview:

> We need to be mindful of her story because we are
> still fighting the idea that white men are the ones
> with the brains and the intellect, and all you need to

understand about us literally and metaphorically

emanates from the genital region. (Philips 503)

Reliably, these issues have been aligned with black women's fiction. Using poetry as the connective matter offers an alternative that expands the view of the genre. Secondly, a new incarnation of black consciousness is cresting in the U.S. when *The Venus Hottentot* appears; it reflects in a popular culture wave that includes Spike Lee's "Malcolm X," fashionable adaptations of West African kente and mud cloth, and the community uplift rapped by KRS-One and Public Enemy. Alexander's book enriches the academic dimension of this context. Ideas of Blackness resurface as writing and debates ensue about Molefe Asante's notion of Afrocentricity, Martin Bernal's *Black Athena,* and Black cultural studies as defined by Stuart Hall, among many others. *The Venus Hottentot* keeps black female exploitation distinct within these conversations. Moreover, she uses persona to construct a voice for Baartman which cites the subject 's physical, psychological and spiritual impact *on her own terms*. This fact establishes a herstoriographic agency by the poet, who is challenging the premise of colonialism that dehumanized Baartman and skewering the hegemony of Western history. Giving Baartman's view also reinstates her as an abused human being, a previously unimaginable agency for the subject.

Alexander has taken full advantage of the rich cultural intersection at which she finds herself. Using her vantage to examine the unspoken and unaccountable absences that punctuate African-American experiences, she writes poems that revisit open questions. Such openings tend to fester with the unexplored and unexpressed, drawing her to the sort of terrain where Sanchez and Clifton have traveled and to the impulses that bring black women into clearer context. She draws on various poetic traditions. Indifferent to binary notions about the politics of form that pervade American poetry, she crosses this boundary so often that she has invented her own poetic country. She pursues her craft with the view that "[g]ood poetry is scrupulous… It has to do with looking inward in a way that is utterly outside of stereotype and doctrine and mandate"

(507). She is something of a centrist in terms of Afro-modernist and postmodern ideas, meaning that experimental forms appear sporadically; their absence does not limit her playfulness nor does their presence define her style. As often as not, stanzas and rhyme are tools she relies upon; she may merge either of these tools with jazz-invested phrasings, as in *Antebellum Dream Book's* "Absence," to call back a Middle Passage moment "[b]efore the head rag, the cast-iron skillet" when "new blue awaited on the other shore" (63). The skill she exhibits in adapting traditional fixed forms, especially the sonnet, to nontraditional subjects is readily recognized among poets, which has encouraged her association with Brooks and Dove. The poet confirms their influence, calling the two her "poetry women" (Phillips 505). She demonstrates great comfort with the sonnet's basic conventions while finding success and delight in variations, slant rhyme, and the occasional surprise of a perfect rhyme. In *Antebellum Dream Book* she taps a measure of surrealism in dream poems that parody, signify, and reference Toni Morrison. None of this prevents her turn to orderly quatrains in an ode to motherly bodies. Across a range of innovative poems, the poet yields a range of moods: curious, pointed and expository, awe-filled, and lyrical. First-person voice is typical when the subjects spring most immediately from the poet's world. Her use of third-person speakers reflects her interest in the past and how it informs the present. In either case, the voice is clear and carved, a tool to pry open and visualize. Joy and analysis often partner in an Alexander poem to give it a playful tone, sometimes deceptively insouciant, but nearly always musical. Behind all this work is her fascination with language. The effect is poetry that has been cut with very particular scissors and arranged with imaginative and deliberate goals.

Alexander insists on centrality for black people, and her poetic gaze is one in which women often figure prominently. The delineation of the black female body as a sign which introduces her work in *The Venus Hottentot* indicates a sophisticated political consciousness that resurfaces throughout *Body of Life* (1996), *Antebellum Dream Book* (2001), and *American*

Sublime (2005). Her aforementioned dispatch of "doctrine" or "mandate" from her work might be best understood as her approach to craft rather than theme and subject matter. For her, "it goes without saying that women and people of color are just as fascinating as anybody to write about", although this comment understates her fascination (Philip 503). While I do not suggest that she offers a bullet-pointed ideology such as Karenga once prescribed[xxvii], Alexander does seem to follow a personal mandate to seek and reflect nuanced examples of Blackness amidst her varied thematic interests.

The scope of Alexander's race-conscious mandate is often international. Taking on the African diaspora in which Neal, Toure, Baraka and others situated the BAM's artistry, its complexity and diversity provides Alexander with a wide cultural base from which to interrogate black subjects. Undoubtedly, her inclinations as a twenty-first century "race woman" are nourished by a host of influences. These include a family keenly aware of race and class–her father chaired the EEOC through the volatile late 1960s and her mother is a history scholar—as well as color; Alexander is willing to break the silence of color consciousness and show its variables. She broaches the family story of "ivory siblings" who "ensured/no one confused them for anything other than what they were, black" (*ADB* 22). Sometimes employing persona, her imaginings of historical moments such as the Amistad rebellion and trial evoke the impact of oppressive structures through sensory and emotional details. With this in mind, it is more imaginable than today's critics may believe to think of Alexander's work as responsive to Neal's question, when he asks black artists "[w]hose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or that of the oppressors?" in 1968 ("The Black Arts Movement" 64). This is not to preclude the many other themes and subjects that Alexander's privilege, intellect, experiences and vigilant eye bring to the fore: insidious losses due to AIDS; the countless facets of ars poetica; pivotal coming-of –age moments; motherhood. Occasionally she finds a cultural photograph of a place and time, such as Washington D.C. or Paris in the 1980s, compelling.

Like Clifton in particular, Alexander trains her focus on naming and claiming the black body. In"The Venus Hottentot," Alexander's construction of Baartman begins in ironic counterpoint: the opening section takes up the persona of scientist George Cuvier, who anticipates seeing her genitals dismembered "inside a labeled//pickling jar in the Musee /de l'Homme" (6). Alexander's structure positions this content to problematize the meaning of terms like freak of nature, savage, and human. Giving Baartman's voice a precise, elevated diction heightens the irony of her cage and further diminishes the discourse of savagery Cuvier imposes on her body. Her testimony emerges within the setting of her objectification—from the cage where she is "a black cutout against/ a captive blue sky" to a table where Cuvier "investigates/…sure of his hypothesis" (6-8). Baartman's report of her situation develops her intellectual capacity. We learn of her initial concept of the offer, responsibility to her family, and memories. Reactions to smell, sight, and texture, voiced from her captive state, jolt her sense of the exterior reality. Her body and voice indict the systemic slave trade at every turn; Alexander alludes to its counterresistance when she cites Bartmaan's "flexible tongue and healthy mouth" in comparison to its depravity in Cuvier's "rotting teeth" (9).

Alexander's references to the body respond to the inevitable question of how one would survive Baartman's fate for any length of time. Her subject supplies an answer by testifying to an interior she keeps alive and uncontrolled: "Since my own genitals are public/ I have made other parts private" (9). Alexander reiterates her subjectivity as Baartman affirms possession of her "mouth, larynx, brain in a single/ gesture" (9). Unvarnished despair and human failing, however, pierces her reflection that "I was certain that this would be/ better than farm life" (9). Through the physical and psychological debasement that will eventually kill her, Baartman strives to feed an imaginary life of hopes, wishes, and deliberate ideas that include the murder of Cuvier. The closing stanza rejects the racist epistemology of dehumanization, colonialism, slavery and pseudo-science that opens the poem with imagery of Cuvier's "black heart/…

/inside/ a bell jar… on a low/ shelf in a white man's museum" (10). The oppositional commentary from this captive black woman underscores the origins, the necessity, and the vitality of not a double, but triple consciousness – to more accurately account for the racist and patriarchal construction of gender in confrontation with the ways black women recognize and represent themselves and thus construct and empower an authentic "herstorical" self.

Alexander's resuscitation of Baartman's actual name contests the lasting injustice of her circumstances and her association with the sideshow moniker used to dehumanize her. By conferring on her the name and emotional dimensions of a thinking human woman, the poet also names her as an *enslaved subject* rather than reinforcing her supposed objectification as *a slave*. The poet's acknowledgement of Baartman's humanity defies her dismemberment on the shelves of European pseudo-scientists. She renames Baartman by inventing a voice for her and issuing her speech from a captive location equivalent to the auction block. These dynamics go beyond re-envisioning an oppressive past, as Alexander observes that "[t]here are all kinds of ways every day that that story still manifests itself" (Philip 503). Finally, an emotional herstory such as Alexander writes through this poem means that Baartman cannot again be separated from the hope, bewilderment, deception, bitterness, and resistance that the poet advances. The herstory of these emotions, once claimed and understood, can be overcome.

Emotional Herstory of the Invisible Woman

Thinking about a larger linkage between Sanchez and Clifton, Finney, Smith and Alexander, leads me to question how the various representations of black women in their poems intersect with the multiple contexts and black feminist epistemologies I have been discussing. For poets like these, who continue to see and write their positionality, the work of representation underway in their words through naming is important enough in that they bring to poetry intersections of human experience less often handled. Yet, they are important in yet another way. With subject matter and poetic tools combined, these poets also write a herstory

of that which has been routinely dismissed, suppressed, and subsumed– black women's emotions. The emotions they give voice to enlarge and deepen their representations. After all, who knows what has truly occurred, large and small, in black women's lives, and what they have felt about it? Who (and this question is mindful of dialogues on essentialism among academics and their selective application) is in a position to write it? How impoverished is American poetry without the insights on such a particular and peculiar American experience as its black women have?

In typically point-blank fashion, Sanchez underscores this central question, indicating how consciously such herstory informs her art:

> We have just skimmed the top of what it means to be an African
> woman in the Diaspora,…to be the lowest person on the totem pole…
> to be an woman of color in the Americas…What was the psychology
> of being an African woman…enslaved on the plantation,…constantly
> tied up with…a Black man, as she negotiated the master's rape?
> What does that do to the psyche? (*Conversations* 186)

Clifton and Sanchez release this bound, gagged, and confined herstory which is, of course, also theirs. It is implicated in Clifton's view that "[s]o much of American history is not validated, because it is seen sometimes as negative", and in Sanchez's stated goal to "reconcile us with ourselves and to reclaim our history/herstory" (Cavalieri 73, *Conversations* 79). They make us literally and figuratively aware of the auction block by engaging the emotional world in which black women are not Othered, inaudible, and invisible. That experience, a palimpsest in the story black women are still writing into being, is compounded by repercussions which influence what they feel to this day. The poets clarify that black female bodies tend to conceal tightly constrained emotional lives simply through the degree of attention their writing pays to these bodies. In the racist, patriarchal, capitalist West that contextualizes this discussion, how black

women's emotions have accommodated their circumstances has been a non-issue. Even when their experiences are stirred into this context, they are likely to be standardized against those of white middle-class women rather than seen on their own terms. Similarly, within African-American cultures, what acknowledgement there is for black women's emotional lives tends to circulate in closed circles– church communities, book clubs, perhaps sororities. Once attached to voices and names, these emotions have a capacity to transform what black women signify to "refashion the particular and reveal the more universal human dimensions of Black women's everyday lives" (Collins 268).

Poetry as emotional herstory is writing that unveils, in order to destroy, the lingering effects of the auction block which continue to overshadow the black female body and psyche. Consequently, this herstory, specifically shaped by black women's subject position, is a most necessary one. An observation Neal makes in the context of discussing Baraka's "The Slave," makes Sanchez's contribution even clearer. "It is impossible to move," he writes, in reference to African-American social progress, "until history is either re-created or comprehended" (70). Beneath its starkly framed pronouncement, his claim actually expresses a social vision, and perhaps a call as well; it entertains a barely-suppressed challenge to learn and write about the past as a liberatory act. It sees need for an informed and critical populace, capable of using the historical past to inform and steer away from future retrenchment.

What these poets do and have done is in some respects a demonstration of that capacity to engage and use herstory creatively. However, this matter of art that works across disciplinary bounds and values seems to incite an apparently inevitable, perpetual struggle of ideas. The concern seems to circle a notion that they be taken more as factual delivery or sociological analysis than art. With their mutability and imaginative roots in place, I hold that poems may perform in simultaneous venues. I see these poems as a tissue containing elements historian Robert Hatch identifies within "the usual continuum of knowledge making and claims to truth,"

moving "from data and information to witnessing, testimony and belief, to texts, [and] reading;" yet also, and importantly for this discussion, Hatch notes that "[c]entral to the enterprise [of writing history] is representation and interpretation" (1). These elements interact with and support the simultaneous layers of imaginative tissue we expect of poetry. I want to stress that I read the poets in play here as artists who observe Neal's dictum that their work should, "through the strength of all of its ingredients—form, content, craft, and technique—illuminate something specific about the living culture of the nation" as well ("Ellison's Zoot Suit"44). The experiences of black people, and in this case, black women, calls for a comprehension of herstory beyond the traditional reach of great women making mountaintop speeches or symbolic acts; the collective movement Neal implies will have to include a layered understanding of herstory as well—one we may glean from poems as well as more conventional sources. Its narrative fragments, gestures, diction and incantations reference the interiority that accompanies black women. This poetry not only acknowledges ensuing issues of self-determination, oppositional discourse and representation; it challenges the ways we may read and construct both history and poetry.

I find it crucial to state that my idea of poetic herstory does not argue for a comprehensive or conventional counternarrative. Even if each poem were reviewed, the emotional herstory emerging from these poets' work would be incomplete, as is any single treatment of collective experience, be it conventional history, nonfiction, or poetry. It will not fully capture the emotions contained by class identity. As a black queer emotional herstory, for instance, it will not satisfy. Nevertheless, their work creates a vital bridge across the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, sustaining attention to black women's positionality in a necessary conversation between generations that have been subject to enormous societal change.

The idea of emotional herstory grows out of and rests on a construction of knowledge derived from Black female culture. Alice Walker specifies its cultural context in imagining the

conditions facing earlier generations of Black women artists who were "exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them" (232). This emotional herstory is a manifestation of "Black Feminist thought" as Collins delineates it. Two particular elements within the framework of black feminist epistemology support this concept, valuing Black women's "lived experience," individual and collective. Elastic as that term is, Collins validates it as a knowledge base; it takes precedence over received knowledge as a "criterion of meaning" (257). This criterion takes account of the wisdom, coming from lived experience, that has enabled Black women's survival. Lorde's reminder that "we were never meant to survive" underscores the challenge inherent in writing from this experiential body of knowledge (*Collected* 256).

I find it valid to apply the word herstory because its neologic composition and feminist origins ring with the same self-determined resistance to silencing and received knowledge that black women's social location so often requires. In *Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender, and The New Racism,* Collins substantiates this resistance as a common characteristic. Detailing economic, social, political, and aesthetic ways in which black women's knowledge tends to oppose the "[d]ominant gender ideology," she makes a summary observation that "everyone else needs Black women to be on the bottom for everything else to make sense" (199). Even though black women may not routinely succumb to this ideology, it exists. They do confront it. Its persistence in the culture means, more often than not, that their experiences, their emotions, and their very lives form a counternarrative. The poets present aspects of this emotional experience, implicitly and, sometimes, explicitly filtered through black women's social location within racial and gender oppression.

If black women's knowledge stretches the concept of herstory in these particular ways, the consideration of their emotional knowledge tempts its explosion. Identifying and validating that emotion on equivalent terms with academic or scholarly knowledge is part of herstory's

function, so that it not simply counters hegemony but alters frameworks. Black feminist thought facilitates this project conceptually. In the very human terms and personal levels of engagement at which Clifton and Sanchez talk and write about their lives as well, we see a black feminist epistemology that affirms emotional herstory (Collins 263). Within this base, the "ethics of caring" Collins sets out helps to ground the validity of emotional knowledge in a black female culture that is common to all the poets (263). Collins' ethic includes an "emphasis on individual uniqueness," which invites the personalized emotional expression they demonstrate (263). Another aspect is the "capacity for empathy" that we see the poets reflect by acknowledging parallels between their own lived experiences and those of other black women (263). These ethics are perhaps more important than may seem necessary as linkages between African-American poetry and cultural values. Further, they support conceptually the notion of a written herstory that includes poetry, a site where the body and voice gain emotional authority, rather than limiting the witness of knowledge to empirical research, scholarly prose, or primary source material. We might even say poetry is a different type of primary source, enabling this different kind of knowledge as extrapolated from its sounding, forms, and content. On this point, I am indebted to Barbara Christian's advocacy for black feminist criticism that should open its arms to poetry along with fiction as content and express "a resistance to art as artifact" (68).

This section provides some illustration of my claim to emotional herstory as each of the poets writes it. As an organizing principle, I pose their poetic herstories as counternarratives to three images of black women's misrepresentation: the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire/Strong Black Woman. These discussions treat some examples of Sanchez and Clifton's emotional herstory, recalling poems from Chapters Two and Three. I extend those discussions, returning to examples by Finney, Smith, and Alexander, respectively.

Poetry and Counternarrative

Abby Lincoln cries out "Who will revere… Black [womanhood]" and declares its subjects "outraged and humiliated" in an essay published in the 1970 *The Black Woman* anthology (100-101). Her fiery essay, relentless in its exposure of feelings common among black women, stands apart from all the multifaceted analyses in that breakthrough work. Emotional herstory has a rare public moment in this essay, as Lincoln details black women's apparent invisibility and insignificance to the world, despite their own throbbing witness to its demands on them. She infers painfully that a world indifferent to black women's humanity and full subjectivity is hardly in position to revere them. Since then, black women scholars have faithfully responded to her question, from Mary Helen Washington and Barbara Smith to the many I cite herein—Barbara Christian, Angela Davis, Nellie McKay and Ajuan Mance, to name a few—building counternarratives to the myths and notions silencing Black womanhood by elaborating their material and personal dimensions. Poets Sanchez and Clifton participate in this response. As I have noted, they come of age as poet-activists who set precedents for those who follow, countering absence and distortion with the diverse contours of black women's interior lives.

Deposing Mammy

> The move for centuries has been to render [the Black woman] a subordinate being, a background figure, to regard her as a self-sacrificing mother,… passive, retiring, physically delicate, not too bright…in some quarters of the Movement she is being assigned an unreal role of mute servant…encouraged to cultivate 'virtues' that…sound like the personality traits of slaves. (124-125)

Toni Cade Bambara's remarks illustrate the Mammy, a black female construct that extends enslavement and, as she notes, remains convenient well into the twentieth century. This figure and circumstance highlights the need for writing black women's emotions. In the

introduction to her study on images of black women, Patricia Morton summarizes some of the scholarship that characterizes the Mammy figure. Her summary delineates a varied, blended, and contradictory of qualities. Mammy is capable of being the "inept and comical domestic servant … the masculinized, domineering matriarch," and all the more an "ideal slave" because she is desexualized (7, 9). Her objectification is fully formed by these adjectives. Even when dominating, she is passive, because her actions are only important as services. Meant to accommodate others, her actual life draws no attention, calls for no celebration or urgency. Sanchez, Clifton, and Alexander write back to those notions; their poems reveal women who know and value themselves. Reading their work as emotional herstories involves countering Mammy's one-dimensional construction. They recognize their womanhood and declare its power and beauty. Their poems redress a long herstory of devaluation, so fully characterized by Mammy, by countering it with these poetic narratives of validation, unassailable selves, and qualities that centralize their femininity and beauty.

Clifton's homages to the black woman's body express with blunt clarity and certainty the transformative qualities of the speaker's own hips, the life-giving electricity and music of her hair. As for her uterus, she never pauses to question or qualify her catalogue. In naming her "estrogen kitchen," she chooses definitive association through metaphor over comparative similes (*Q* 58). Sanchez's journeying speaker in "present" prefaces her quest by situating an image of herself, praising her body to relate a harmony between her own powerful beauty and that which radiates from the natural world around her. This much remains true even when her life-adventure encounters challenges.

Boldness in tone and subject shapes these poems. It stretches from praise to ferocity, telling readers that Clifton and Sanchez's black women speakers are driven by developed, even suppressed, inner lives. Suppression contributes to the intense orality and uncommon imagery we see so frequently from both. Repetition, as I have noted, creates an insistent voice and a

return to the poem's core ideas. Its use concentrates lifetimes of determination, often cultivated in secret or silence, that underline black women's knowledge. These poems are as unequivocal as black female experiences: they accommodate no story but their own; they tolerate no knowledge which excludes or diminishes black women's worth. Sanchez's "style no. 1" encompasses the herstory of that diminishment and freedom from suppression in its orality—pairing the speaker's positive self-regard with the ferocious defense she launches against one who perceives her as an object. The same is true of "song no. 2," where self-possessed language and rhythm doubles the emphasis of "step back world. we're risin from the dead" (73). The unshakeable vernacular of Clifton's "what the mirror said," repeatedly intoning an awesome regard for the mirrored black woman, is an equally strong example.

Anger is an emotion that readily topples the second-class citizenship that Mammy signifies. Having no true agency for herself, she has no definitive plan; she is not designed for anger. Yet, black women have long struggled with internalized angers born of fearsome truths. Where do these suppressed angers and fears go? Not far, as Sanchez's "style no. 1" indicates that they may be easily awakened by circumstances that brush close to black women's herstory of injustice. However, Clifton's Kali series invigorates and instills these emotions, too intense for the poem's speaker to contain, by deflecting them to the Hindu goddess. Her struggle with Kali is a quite brash exposure of fear and fury, emotions black women have been socialized to mask as stoic strength and/or indifference. Even though they wrestle across several poems, the fact is, Clifton allows this presence a place and Kali prevails, as she is both angry and relentless. The dance between the Clifton persona and Kali nudges black women toward the battle site where fierce emotions they harbor and conflicts they suppress make war against the roles available to them.

The poets refute the idea that anger is only evident when visible, and danger is only present when active. Clifton's Kali poems admit a smoldering interiority in black women which

counters the norm. Can a black woman be angry in public, in poetry, and in print? Her depiction of the goddess represents an awesome rage *and* the agency to act it out. This is emotion the dominant culture, through misrepresentation, has sought to dissuade black women from indulging. Expressed anger attaches them to Sapphire's image of the 'evil black woman', although taking a stand against injustice may call for a very satisfying dose of rage. Yet in the five subsequent Kali poems, "she insists on me," "she understands me," "she is dreaming," and "calming Kali," Clifton shows her speaker's discomfort with the sort of bristling black power Kali identifies in her. The poet reports that even when she hides behind her sisters and daughters, and then pleads, "woman woman you are not/welcome in these bones," the goddess remains unsatisfied, as "nothing fools her" (*GW* 136). In the last of the series, Clifton's speaker concedes to the clamor within her, promising Kali her "bones /and… blood to feed on" and finally, "I know I am your sister" (140). Even in surrender, Holladay notes, Clifton resists full acceptance that she and Kali are one, but instead, members of a tribe of destructive goddesses (77). I extend Holladay's observation to add that Clifton wants us to speculate on the volatility capable of brewing unseen, unexpressed, and possibly unacknowledged in black women. It is significant that she closes the series with that line, especially since, for many poets, the singular "I" represents a plurality. Kali's treatment in a series rather than a single poem suggests volumes of feeling. This strained herstory of black women's private struggles with rage proliferates. Clifton shows us the efforts to deny, manage, deflect, and redirect it, as Sanchez's speaker reveals its occasional verbal release in "style no. 1."

Bold self-regard and anger in the voice of Saartjie Baartman are emotions Alexander also develops to counter her profoundly objectified image as the "Venus Hottentot." The reactions of supposedly cultured whites outside her cage do not preoccupy her. Alexander turns Baartman's gaze on caged captivity to an account of how her dreams and plans have gone awry. She constructs a youthful, naïve subject disarmed by her normative view of a black body demeaned

by European fetishistic pseudo-science. Baartman's boldness is rooted in an imagination that does not recognize the dynamics of colonialism. It enables her to dream, at first, of return to an already colonized southern Africa as "a duchess, with watered silk/ dresses and money to grow food" (7). Years into her role, Baartman speaks when she is "bitter" and "sick," and not positioned to self-celebrate as Clifton and Sanchez's speakers do (8). She does assert a positive regard and ownership of her intelligence, and a defiant imagination through which she maintains ownership of her interior. She continues to dream in self-defining ways, configuring herself as a beautifully-coiffed mother of daughters. Alexander gives voice to a woman whose emotional consciousness allows her to analyze her audiences and plot violence against her scientist-captor. Only as an object of fury and the victim of a murder she plans and replans does Baartman give any hint of interest in him. By constructing this caged and tied down woman according to her emotional and critical ability, Alexander contrasts her starkly to a Mammy figure.

Clifton, Sanchez, and Alexander are aligned in raising up the herstory of relationship between black women and the power and beauty of their bodies. This herstory conveys their struggle to find ready acceptance of themselves. Otherwise, what explains "what the mirror [says]" and why it must be so stated? Why else do the details of personal appearance in both "style no. 1" and the homages compel such pointed and effusive regard? Why else must Clifton's moment of pointed address in "homage to my hair' be directed to a metonymic "black man" if not because he tends to overlook the speaker and her special gifts (*GW* 168)? For the same reason, Sanchez aligns the mention of a black woman's mouth and buttocks with the beauty of "coltrane's melodies" as she seeks to connect her life to its meaning (*SL* 18). Hips, buttocks, and lips work on their own behalf rather than in servitude; as traits linked to Mammy, mention of these features references a particular herstory of mockery and disrespect as humans and as women that follows black women through and beyond enslavement. Alexander expounds on

that herstory by writing Cuvier into in her narrative of Baartman's constricted and murderous fantasy life. Sanchez, Clifton and Alexander as well, reveal the herstory of black women's struggle to speak for themselves, one that breaks the silent hold of Mammy.

The poets understand this herstory of maligned black bodies and consciously write alternatives. Knowing that Black women's emotional herstory includes frequent attack for being overweight, Clifton redefines the big woman's body by herstoricizing and celebrating the "mighty hips" that have "never been enslaved" (*GW* 168). Alexander complements Clifton, redefining the spectacle of scientific slavery by using Baartman's body and emotions to tell her story– an analytical weapon that powerfully indicts colonialist, racist and sexist hegemony. An emotional herstory such as Alexander writes through Baartman means that the poem stands against her continued dissection; she cannot be separated from the hope, bewilderment, deception, bitterness, and resistance that the poet restores to her.

Dismissing Jezebel

"Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb," Hortense Spillers writes. "Their sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them" (qtd. in Guy-Sheftall 14). Spillers alludes to the literary damage done by representations of black women as hypersexual Jezebels, the sexual mythology which unifies all other stereotypical images of black women. That mythology, harkening back to slavery, classifies Jezebel as the perpetually available temptress, and Tragic Mulatto as the goddess unraveled by her dueling desires; however, the workhorses, Sapphire and even docile Mammy, could be prevailed upon as secret sexual targets. For the sake of progress, the social service work organized by middle-class 'race women' in the early twentieth century sought to incorporate aspects of the Cult of True Womanhood into an uplift paradigm that might rehabilitate black women from this trauma.[xxviii] Jezebel's sexual mythology inscribes black women's bodies and minds with a dehumanizing set of messages about sex, sustained across centuries and

continents: they have no role in voicing their sexual desire, and any sexual suffering they experience requires no response, let alone justice. Thus, black women have come to signify a set of sexual images through a false, externally constructed process having little to do with their own bodies, minds, or voices. Well-entrenched throughout the 20th century, media forms have often appropriated these images intact, whether for blaxploitation films or journalistic ends, such as the 'welfare queen' of the 1990s. Subsequently, few restorative messages or acknowledgements of what sexual abuse has cost black women personally ever emerges in the culture. As Gail Elizabeth Wyatt contends, they remain "stolen," their sexuality unrecovered and unrestored, leaving the silences Spillers describes in Jezebel's wake (3).

Fortunately, this void is not complete; the sexual dimension of black women's emotional herstory located in poems by Sanchez, Clifton, and Finney opposes and deflects the varied proliferation of Jezebel. Sanchez and Clifton write black female desire out of their respectively sassy, self-determined heterosexual points of view, beginning early in their careers. Finney enriches this terrain by writing on black lesbian terms. Collectively, their poems bring narratives of desire and lived experience to black women's long herstory of sexual abuse, physical and representational. Their voicing of sexual ownership/self-determination and truth-telling undermines the damage done by the Jezebel mythology.

One original purpose of the Jezebel figure was to suppress and justify black women's sexual abuse by white men, during and beyond slavery: a herstory of unprosecuted, undocumented rape over at least two centuries. Consequently the residual emotional herstory is also suppressed. This herstory, a clear indication of the wounds black women carry, echoes in the rhetorical question that closes Lincoln's essay: "To whom can she cry rape?"(101). Living the legacy of black women's sexual exploitation means that the stories of rape and harassment of great-grandmothers and aunts and second cousins thrive in silence like bacteria, never dispelled, never cured. It means a great likelihood that similar stories linger among mothers,

grown daughters, teens, and girl children. This is the field of memory Sanchez reaches into when the speaker of "style no. 1" connects her present solicitation on a street corner to incidents past, as a black preteen girl at the movies. She calls to the spirit of an older female, knowing she taps into a knowledge regarding sexual confrontation that is specifically black and female. Rage comes into her mind and onto her tongue, harvested from this collective experience. Here, as in "song no. 2," we have the emotional herstory of black women who have known abuse and fought back. Clifton, on the other hand, writes the herstory of the defenseless. She, too, calls on memory but it presses her toward a more silent, secret knowledge: her own. The four-part series known as the shapeshifter poems (which first appear in *Next,* 1990 and later in *Blessing the Boats,* 1999) draw out Clifton's terror and isolation as a girl molested by her father. She does not begin to publish or read these poems publicly until the mid-1990s, and has spoken of the difficulties she faced in committing to write them. Undoubtedly, the truth of Clifton's struggles belies a herstory other black women share, couched in layers of shame-filled silence. Sanchez and Clifton's willingness to pierce the layers of shame to pursue black women's long herstory of abuse and voice it is a vital example of art that counters and problematizes perception.

The construct of the Jezebel, gone uncontested, also steals from black women the cultivation of imagery and language defining their own joyful sexual voices; Sanchez and Clifton have been factors in amplifying that definition since their early work. They reveal delight and playfulness, sorrow and lust, alienation and yearning. As Clarke notes, the BAM "marked the first time black women poets opened a discourse on sexuality" (71). During this period, at least one poem appears in print by poets such as Carolyn Rodgers, Mari Evans, and Nikki Giovanni, and lesser-knowns including Carole Gregory and Saundra Sharpe, extolling a physical heterosexual love.[xxix] Such poems eventually seemed compulsory. If Sanchez's initiative did not enable this trend, it certainly nurtured it, as her example has been consistent. From her first volume, in which "Black Magic" seeks a sexual redefinition of its title ("black magic is your

touch/making me breathe" [*H* 12]), to *Like the Singing Coming off the Drums (*1999*),* a collection largely devoted to the topic of love and sex, her poems take various forms (tankas and haiku, most often), granting black women the connectivity of the first person voice. Sanchez poems unveil these and other emotions perhaps more thoroughly, broadly, and consistently than those by any other contemporary black female poet. Clarke's take on these representations problematizes them as supports to the already masculinist BAM. As decontextualized and slanted as it becomes at points, her analysis provokes vital deeper reflection on this trend. She takes Sanchez to task for overinvesting in the curative of romantic love, and credits black women's new sexual freedom to feminism and the existence of birth control (71-73, 77, 64). That assessment may largely be accurate, although she leaves no possibility afoot that the new attitudes of self-love generated by the BAM could have a role.

Sanchez and Clifton's sexual herstory cites black women's own visions of lusty fulfillment and their self-definition as sexual human beings. They write the experiences of women who are self-aware, flagrantly self-serving lovers, deliberate and particular rather than indiscriminate. This celebration itself unravels the Jezebel myth, which relies on the notion that black women's sexuality is commonplace and animalistic. Sanchez's work demonstrates this with a bawdy humor. She writes, "done drunk so much of you i staggers in my sleep," in "Blues," giving a nod to Sterling Brown's hyperbolic use of the form. Targeting a playfully serious lust in "Towhomitmayconcern," the speaker warns, "you gon know you done been touched by me/this time./ima gonna tattoo me on you fo ever/ leave my creases all inside yo creases" (*SL* 71). In turn, Clifton treats sexuality through brazen, mythic imagery and a quiet certainty in tone, as transgressive as Sanchez's humor. As far back as *An Ordinary Woman* in 1974, she offers the typically short "to a dark moses" (*GW* 127). This sly poem pours on seductive fuel from the first line, "you are the one i am lit for" (127). It goes on to stir sex into biblical references, signifying on the most stalwart of church mothers. Clifton is also direct about the longevity of lust, fantasy

and the body's interior life. With that certainty, the hopeful speaker of an untitled poem identifies a "girl inside/randy as a wolf" who "will not walk away/ and leave these bones/to an old woman" (*GW* 170). The girl/woman who "can break through gray hairs" to a time of "blossom" states a preference for multiple "lovers [who] will harvest honey and thyme," prompting Holladay to observe that she anticipates not only sex but liberation from societal constraints (*GW* 170, *Wild Blessings* 64).

Finney brings equally suppressed and equally important, yet different aspects to this sexual herstory that make the term more comprehensive. The acknowledgement of abuse and of sexual pleasure I have identified with Sanchez and Clifton both occur within "Sex," making it a particularly efficient, powerful poem. Into its single scene, Finney writes the psychological abuse of heterosexism from a parent that the lesbian speaker experiences after she has come out to her mother. Full of hurt, the speaker simultaneously begins to fill with pleasure and wondrous pride in her sexuality. She turns from the implications of her mother's dismissive judgment to rumination on her body's knowledge –which is carnal, yet also spiritual. I also find it remarkable that Finney's use of vocal inflection manages to render some emotional sense of the mother's deep disappointment in her daughter and the entrenched gulf between them.

Just as its speaker turns decidedly from her mother's allegedly comprehensive definition of sex, Finney's poem dismisses the Jezebel from duty. The poem shines light under the myth of black women's sexual abandon, exposing another one: that of male sexual domination of women. In the speaker's sexual world, there can be no Jezebel. Her confident black lesbian self-regard deflates its heterosexist construction of black female sexuality and unravels its effort to separate black women's sexual lives from their emotions. Finney's record of queer self-determination and acceptance brings out another type of suppressed herstory. It traces back to a difficult struggle about homosexual identity and acceptance among politically active black writers at large which the BAM's open hostility only amplified. This is a poem which, in some

measure, may have been activated by the awakened voicing of love poetry to which Sanchez and Clifton contributed at a time of presumed heterosexuality. To a greater degree, though, its way is paved by other influences. Metonymically, the speaker of "Sex" stands up before her mother as representative for a community of Black lesbian feminist poets—Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Cheryl Clarke, Kate Rushin and others—who have challenged their racial 'family' while insisting on their place in it. She expands significantly that sexual herstory which Clifton, Sanchez, and others begin approaching in the late 1960s.

Collectively, Clifton, Sanchez and Finney give voice to some aspects of a herstory, simply put, of black women's desires. These poems constitute, in at least two respects, a pivotal act of recovery. One act involves the affirmation of desire and sex, directed specifically to black women; secondly, they publicly pronounce a black female experience that is freely sexual and furthers the blueswomen's tradition I describe in Chapter Two. Finney's work presses the point that this herstory is wide, deep, and worthy of long overdue exploration. Hers is that of the ongoing silencing of lesbians (in particular, and gay men, by inference) within African-American communities and their subsequent pain and anger. The herstory of queer resistance to heterosexual hegemony also condenses in her poem through its refusal to submit to silencing, a position that sustains black women, but also others standing against a hegemonic system which the mother in "Sex" represents. The poets make a double declaration of sexual independence– distancing black women from the Jezebel image on one hand and shaping personas of deliberate desire on the other.

Countering Sapphire

Freedom for Black women's sexual self-definition, however, does not bind all wounds. On its underside are emotions that destabilize and rewrite the myth of the strong black woman. In the following passage, bell hooks reflects on a televised encounter with that myth, often

named Sapphire, from younger years. Her comments fuel the ideas of black women's emotional herstory I have discussed above as painfully as they frame the stereotype at hand:

> She was there as man in drag, as castrating bitch, as someone to be lied to, someone to be tricked…[s]capegoated on all sides. …We laughed along with the black men, with the white people. We laughed at this black woman who was not us…How could we long to be there when our image, visually constructed, was so ugly…Her black female image was not the body of desire. There was nothing to see. . .Grown black women had a different response to Sapphire; they identified with her frustrations and her woes. They resented the way she was mocked. (120)

The simplistic fiction of black women as unassailable towers of strength, despite any elements of truth, is another legacy of the auction block. Sanchez, Clifton, and Smith recognize this legacy of Sapphire's dishonored and distorted emotions in the lives of actual black women; among their poems are those that dissemble their dehumanized imagery as hostile and indifferent laborers, ably embodied by Sapphire. The poets contest this figure by writing the vulnerability, sorrow, and spiritual reverence of black women subjects, emotional realities which put the notion of strength in a human context.

Truthtellers like Clifton and Sanchez cannot be expected to simplify. Their poems look into aspects of Black women for which various publics had no use, acknowledging that they are not, and could not possibly always be strong. Vulnerability has a voice in their herstories, which sometimes reveal its multiple causes, as in Clifton's shapeshifter poems. It appear as well in the bereft speaker of "grown daughters" and "four daughters;" here is a middle-aged woman, uncertain of her role and who her children have become, uneasy about the massive investment of life energy and time she has contributed; these poems skew the ideal of black mothers as

indomitable. Sanchez's poems narrate the precarious circumstances of young black womanhood. Sanchez's "Like" echoes, in its stark opening lines, the gritty revelation of "summer words of a sistuh addict" detailed in Chapter Two. Written thirty years apart, both poems relate the eerie certainty of a young female voice makes her alienation from positive self-esteem plain. They unfold a herstory of young black womanhood that is not simply naïve. Vulnerability bespeaks their betrayal, spells out their abandonment and threatened dissolution.

Like

All i did was
go down on him
in the middle of
the dance floor
cuz he is a movie
star he is a blk/
man "live" rt off
the screen fulfilling
my wildest dreams. (*SL* 107)

Acting only in relation to what surrounds her, this speaker has erased herself. Her private estrangement activates a hunger for fantasy so intense that it devours propriety, making her both pimp and prostitute, enslaved and oppressor of her own body. This poem, which is subtitled "Listening to the News," draws on a true story Sanchez heard reported. Sanchez tells Juanita Johnson-Bailey that she was hurt by the news story, most because of the current herstory it may reflect. "We might be in danger of losing [our humanity] with this younger generation," a danger she links to the "ahistorical" action of a young woman embracing the Jezebel role (*Conversations* 76-77). "We must work hard to make them understand the

herstory/history we have," she says, reviewing early efforts of Black clubwomen to combat the Jezebel stereotype and thus, bringing perspective to this young woman's actions (77). "It is a constant fight…all over the earth to bring African women on center stage again, out of people's homes where they have relegated us—always somebody's mammy—public or private" (76).

Vulnerability extends to hope-filled longings and sorrows to which Clifton and Sanchez each bear witness. Their work addresses a substantial and subverted painful herstory particular to the politics of black womanhood, one numerous women poets made public in the BAM period. Having fought their way to a positive Blackness which includes visions of an improved community and personal life, these women often found themselves alone. Longing creates a dialogue between the two poets at one point, as Sanchez's classic lyric "poem at thirty," perhaps her most-anthologized work, later inspires Clifton's "song at midnite." The first poem situates the speaker in a lonely reflection beginning at "midnight/ no magical bewitching hour" (*SL* 4). It closes with a plea that overturns Sapphire's 'evil' reputation as a hostile wisecracker and shifts that intensity to her heart: "you you black man/ stretching scraping/ the mold from your body./ here is my hand. /i am not afraid /of the night" (4). Her speech and gesture allude to the ruptured dynamics between Black men and women throughout the "night" of enslavement and its long aftermath. In tune with the herstory of estrangement from femininity that hooks associates with Sapphire, Clifton's song goes directly to black women's of rejection and loneliness for sexual companionship: "brothers,/this big woman/carries much sweetness/in the folds of her flesh" (*BL* 24). Knowing, on one hand, how powerful and beautiful black women are, the speaker's situation brings her to an emotional crossroads. She also knows their herstory as women black men have also learned to defeminize and reject, and this intersectionality forces her sad confrontation: "who will hold her, / who will find her beautiful/ if you do not?" (24). These women, seeking and periodically failing to break down alienation and find community, know that strength rises and falls away.

The poets also unveil other questions that shed brighter light on the emotional story being told: if, in the culture and iconography of a racist, patriarchal, heterosexist hegemony, the standard for beauty and desirability as it is constructed upholds white women, what does that mean to the emotional lives black women lead—heterosexual or not? Further, how does it affect their sense of self, or the choices that build their lives? Sanchez, in particular, follows a path cut by Brooks, who identifies these issues in *Maude Martha* (1953). Her exceptional willingness to approach this deeply entrenched herstory in honest and uncompromising terms may reflect her involvement in the BAM's push to activate Blackness through imagery. In 1969's "to all brothers," her speaker regards a type of black male response to sexually aggressive white women with cool disdain and irony. Its companion poem, one of two titled "to all sisters," begins by asking "what a white woman got// cept her white pussy// always sucking after blk/ness" (*h* 27). These are poems that, for heterosexual Black women especially, expose and defuse some of the vulnerability and sorrow resulting from what they may perceive as emotional abandonment by black men, the ugly twin to the stereotyping they face. Houston Baker's description of a crowd of women who heard the poem read in San Francisco underscores the emotional herstory I reference here: "People danced in the aisles, sent up hoots of approval, laughed/cried—went crazy. The meeting simply could not continue" ("Our Lady" 330-1).

Sanchez and Clifton have not shied, in their work, from articulating black women's reverence for and reliance on spiritual forces. While their poems do not follow or endorse any formalized line of religious thinking, they move among many. Clifton sustains a fascination with Biblical figures and narratives, particularly those silent and estranged ones such as Mary, mother of God and Lucifer. Sanchez joined the Nation of Islam briefly, and some of those older poems reference its tenets. With that exception, no overt religious connection appears in Sanchez's work until she adapts the title of *Wounded in the House of a Friend* (1995) from a passage in the Book of Zechariah. However, any revelation of black women's emotions is

decidedly not codified by formal, or traditionally Western, belief systems. Writing from a place of wonder, their work goes beyond Western concepts of spirit. Rather, their awareness of spirit drifts upward through the work like breath that they fan with a deliberate hand. Its presence is written into sound through their use of repetition, gaps and slashes, and into stated humanistic concerns.

Sanchez and Clifton tend to represent and locate the herstory of black women's bonds to the spiritual in the silences surrounding memory and the dead; these stand in for the explicit mystery of black narratives deliberately destroyed by slavery, for cognitive ruptures between past, present, and future which the Middle Passage opened up, and for the mysteries that remain present. Thinking about the invisible herstory of the air inside Elmina Castle in Ghana or that surrounding Goree Island in Senegal might present a clearer example. Among these explorations, ancestors are a common denominator. Both poets had grandmothers to whom their granddaughters attribute great clarity and rootedness regarding race, gender, and class dynamics. Their sense of the spiritual derives, in part, from cultivating the herstory they receive through these ancestral connections and pass on. This knowledge, derived from oral narratives in Clifton's case (that she depicts in *Generations: A Memoir*), or the memory Sanchez reconstructs, informs their poems in which these ancestors represent access to intangible silence, unimaginable memory, unattainable herstory. The absent and present aspects of this knowledge comprise a herstory ingrained in the transition from past captivity to current survival, made partially of silences. Sanchez helps to explain this silent herstory in an interview:

> I've always been in touch with our female ancestors. In that sense, my work is spiritual. And most of the work has a history to it. I am always researching and then creating from that research…I carry the sister, the women who were on the block being sold. I carry those first Africans who came to this

country and must have screamed out at the gods.

(*Conversations* 76)

Indeed, the silenced traumas that have been packaged as strength in Sapphire are bound to the matter of black women's survival. Sanchez and Clifton indicate that the spiritual herstories hidden behind this strength exist in a partly intangible liminality. Sanchez's chant in "kwa mama zetu waliotuzaa" gives dimension to this intangibility through the sound of chant. The epistolary prose poem Sanchez writes for her paternal grandmother, "Dear Mama," configures the ancestor/grandmother as transcendent. She is capable of shifting her power between the ancient and the present world, between paradigms such as the religious and the secular. Using synesthesia to enact this shift, Sanchez writes "The color of your song/ calls me home" (*SL* 63-66). Similarly, the grandmother Clifton references is long dead but ever-present. The speaker of "daughters" believes she witnesses the living world and moves in it through the six-fingered agency of female descendants that include the poet herself. These herstories of spirituality and survival also appear in Sanchez's "present" where a ritual of emotional trials send the speaker out of immediate awareness, and later, enable her to go on, "making pilgrimage to herself" (*SL* 18). Clifton names her persona a "hag" capable of "riding" or possessing, time and space by claiming the ancient African and the witch (*BB* 119, *NX* 26). This very language refers to concrete, reverent interactions with spirits that acknowledge black women's herstory as keepers of hoodoo and folk culture generally. She imagines that the task of her lost African identity is to compel her daily thirst for life. Even though her Africanness cannot fully be recovered and known, Clifton reaches into the mystery and connects its liminal possibilities to her passion. The intangibility and mystery of the spirit is hardly off-putting or dangerous; in fact, she of the formerly six-fingered hands has consummate trust, solace and irrefutable pride in the bold self she derives from and gives to the spirit world.

Patricia Smith's "Annie Pearl Smith Discovers Moonlight" sustains the poetic conversation Clifton and Sanchez initiate, which names black women according to vulnerable and spiritual emotional realities. Through a perceptive portrait of Annie Pearl's resistance to the 1969 American moon landing, Smith further disassembles the Sapphire figure. This task begins with a descriptive close-range view of how Annie Pearl negotiates her black working-class female life. That life becomes a more human experience of factory work, housework, aging and hope aimed at "the one and only road to salvation" (*BTBT* 4). The point of the poem is to catch the downward arc of Annie Pearl's hopes, disappointments and deceits. The moon landing is the conceit that unpacks the emotions Smith ties to Annie Pearl's subject position. She survives by enforcing any balance that faith can provide. The event places Annie Pearl at a genuine spiritual crossroads, despite the speaker's sly mockery of her mother's belief in a pristine, biblical heaven.

Annie Pearl is no absolutist matriarch such as Claudia McNeil's Lena Younger imprints on American culture in the first filmed version of Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*. She is furious but also fearful and destabilized by the notion of her "violated paradise" (5). Under her disgust, Smith uncovers sobering byproducts of a Sapphire-like existence: her grasp on wonder and desperate fear of losing the few survival tools that remain. Moreover, her family subtly undermines her emotional distress. As they eat her dinner, the skeptical glances between Annie Pearl's husband and daughter recall hooks' description of Sapphire's emotional isolation. Smith closes the poem with an image of Annie Pearl alone at the window; the speaker tells us she "whispered in tongues" and "ached for a sign" (5). She remains in a liminal emotional zone, grounded by evidence that weighs against her faith but still believing.

Here is an emotional herstory that brings dimension to the representation of black working-class women. Its narrative de-centers the entrenched and superficial image of the staunch and stoic black matriarch. Smith's poem recalls similar moves by Sanchez, who revives

an elderly homeless woman's herstory in "just don't never give up on love" and Clifton's series of "Thelma" poems which ruminate on her mother's gifts, conflicts and frailties. Smith's work is also an important for its uncommon articulation of the emotions shaping black women's spiritual relationships in more conventional Christian contexts than those Sanchez and Clifton depict. If Sanchez, Clifton, and other poets have been central in making black women's emotional lives an identifiable literary presence, this poem indicates Smith as part of that group forging ahead to continue making literature that engages the varied intersections where black women's lives play out.

"[T]he *[S]elves [*W]e [K]now and [T]he [*S]elves* [W]e [H]ave [F]orgotten"[xxx]

The claim I have put forward for this poetry as emotional herstory has validity in the context of black women's agency in general and specifically, in their treatment of their own lives through writing. Beverly Guy-Sheftall refers to texts such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Linda Brent as "resistance narratives" (Guy-Sheftall 31). "A significant aspect," she writes, of these narratives "portrays their courageous quest for the integrity of their bodies, which have historically been displayed, beaten, stripped, bruised, penetrated, overworked, raped, and even lynched" (31). Brent's work also draws power from its emotional complement to this corporeality. If the work I have only sampled in the preceding chapters and above is any indication, each poet I have discussed–in their way, at this time—is doing the same work. As a poet-scholar, I find it important that poetry be recognized as its own type of resistance narrative, an idea so often reserved for prose.

Although continuing a literary tradition of black women writing emotion into their herstories reaches back to Sojourner Truth, Frances E.W. Harper, and a host of others would be important enough, the lineage I recognize in this discussion enables that poetic tradition to look further forward. I conclude that the groundwork of contemporary black feminist consciousness that Sanchez and Clifton have figured in providing complements the influences on these

younger poets. Sanchez states that "Our work in the seventies was about empowerment," and her point crystallizes a connective idea among the poets that art is a vehicle for practicing justice (*Conversations* 22). The assertion of this ideal, and a steady regard for the wide world of African-American culture, is the core of their connection. From Sanchez and Clifton to Finney, Smith, and Alexander, their poems demonstrate a counter-discourse that goes forward to continue a socially dynamic art. All are attentive to the pluralities and nuances of black women's emotions worthy of specific attention to and synthesis with wholeness—or as Neal writes, "the *selves* we know and the *selves* we have forgotten" ("Ellison's Zoot Suit" 52). This sustained poetic engagement brings together political and artistic *consciousness*. Their work tells a newer generation (and preceding ones) that more goes on in this engagement with black women's lives than intellectual fashion, and it has meaning for everyone. From these poets we gain a realization that the herstories of black female experience are just beginning to unfold.

I make this claim even as I acknowledge that the literary project of writing black women's herstory is extensive and hardly limited to the late twentieth century. By fertilizing and cultivating language that embraces what is black, female, and oppositional within an American culture that wished to erase, ignore, or exoticize such voices, Sanchez and Clifton help to foreground the immediate climate in which Finney, Smith, and Alexander have emerged. One indicator of that is a surge in the post-Civil Rights middle-class African-American readership since 1974, as Griffin cites in a *Journal of Black Studies* survey, of which women comprise 75 per cent (170). Similarly, Black Studies programs, in which Sanchez had a founding role, also transform the socio-political climate in which the assertion of and reception to black women subjects takes place. How would this readership have been cultivated without the radical constructions of Blackness that emerged from the BAM, from not only male, but female voices? In bell hooks' summation of the perceptual and conceptual barriers against which black feminist writers, especially poets, developed, Sanchez and Clifton are strongly implicated:

> [A] fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic codes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory. (2)

Directly and indirectly, then, Sanchez and Clifton are representative benefactors of these three poets, their gift the assertion and development of a literary and cultural politics which the beneficiaries have applied with expansive vision. In turn, Finney, Smith, and Alexander represent, across their diversity in content, form, and style, added evidence that the poetry of black women's experience produces effective artistic potency, theory, and praxis. Can poetry participate in this way? Have we learned today what Clifton and Sanchez began to demonstrate in 1969, if hooks can assert that "[m]ore than any other genre of writing, the production of honest confessional narratives by black women who are struggling to be self-actualized and to become radical subjects are needed as guides, as texts that affirm our fellowship with one another" *without* ever mentioning poetry? (60). My hope is that this study contributes to a deepening, and more interdisciplinary, approach to conversations about literary study, and black women's poetry in particular.

However, this poetry envelops the making of art within basic and urgent questions. *How* does one's emotional life survive to realize impulses toward love and justice? Without emotional survival, what supports the art? The stakes, in daily human terms, involved in their agency are summarized pointedly by bell hooks:

> Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life (20).

In other words, something psychologically valuable, even *life- sustaining,* issues from these poets' work. We hear the echo of Brooks in hooks' assertion. It calls, in this discussion, for acute realization of Black women's lives, known and unknown, past, present, and future, as irrefutably political and necessary. Through emotional herstory, they strive to transform the ways of "looking and being" that black women experience in naming themselves instead of being named by others. Their literary renamings claim an existential space for black female subjectivity as self-owned and self-defined. Collins tells us that self-definition is important in the "journey from victimization to a free mind" (112). The self-defining journey, indeed, speaks to Foucault's conclusion that "space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (168). Although he may only have meant physical space, I argue that the point can stretch to include psychological space, as well. Briefly, since the incongruous positionality of black people post-captivity, in America (and beyond, of course) has meant that the physical space they could peacefully occupy is ever-contested, directly and indirectly threatened by a host of opposing forces, they have responded by claiming psychological notions of space. Neal's assertion that "black people, however dispersed, constitute a nation within the belly of white America" is a parallel example of the power of space that Foucault declares. Another is that space which renaming creates for black women and anyone (which is everyone) affected by this power shift. Equally important is how, through the act of renaming, the poets adhere to African-American literary traditions, which recognize the social dynamism of poetry. In that regard, the BAM's moment is among the most prominent in contemporary American culture.

I have also sought to gesture, throughout this study, to the impact of the BAM, which has often been the colloquial baby thrown out with the bath water. One concern is to provide some of the context that Sanchez and Clifton bring to the BAM period as a way of indicating the distinct involvement and concerns of many black women poets. I have hoped also to provoke increased thought about how Sanchez and Clifton elected to translate the BAM poetry's

tremendous consciousness-raising capacity and its values of art as self-determination to poetry which validates black women's emotions. Moving from Clifton and Sanchez's innovations to the diverse poetics of Alexander, Finney, and Smith in the process, I recognize how my sense of the emotional underpinninings of the BAM and these values inform my claim about continuity. The BAM was not simply a movement to build a politicized community of artists. It was a movement in which a new way of constructing and articulating Blackness, undertaken on a personal basis, was crucial to its larger aims. This mandate was widespread, crossing most cultural and political factions of Black nationalism. Within this self-defined Blackness, Neal recognized the "beauty and love within black America" (uncommon language, dare I say, until then among African-Americans) and "a profound sense of [its] unique…culture" ("Shine" 15). These representational findings show through in the emotional herstories of Clifton, Sanchez, Finney, Smith and Alexander.

Emotion brought the BAM about, emotions as intense as political betrayal, economic injustice, and cultural subjugation. One hundred years of effort by African-Americans to assimilate, cooperate, contribute and collaborate had left the majority largely empty-handed and still without full citizenship. Witnessing this seismic force, knowing its impact on black women at large and on themselves, this lineage of poets, then and now, have processed it toward the healing core of poetry. They understand internalized racism and suppressed emotions, lacking air, image, shape and sound, as danger. Their own emotional responses rise to agency through the saving grace of words capable of easing suffering. Lorde affirms that there is a future in their trust in language and their ability to wield it as an act of love: **"**As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us"(36). This is a process that goes in cycles; silences which the BAM broke down are like those Finney, Alexander and Smith take part in breaking again. Clifton has said that the

BAM "brought to American literature a long missing part of itself," and these women poets who join her and Sanchez have stitched that part more tightly into place (Rowell 67).

Writing this emotional herstory is part of the cultural work these contemporaries, in their devotion to a humanist transformation of American society, have found necessary to perform. Their work to position Black women more clearly and profoundly within those transformative visions situates Gail Elizabeth Wyatt's assessment that "what happened on that auction block centuries ago is still unfinished business for black women today" (3). This business is unresolved and at issue particularly, but not only, for black women. Part of the work of transforming the auction block has to do with how its dynamics have been made manifest and infiltrated contemporary life. These have bearing on our perceptions of humanity, our construction of value systems, hierarchies, hegemonies and identities. Most certainly, then, any scholarly efforts that propose to represent American literature converse with these poetic narratives.

The daunting human projects of survival taking place on what Sell calls the "triple front" ("Don't Forget" 2) of economics, politics, and culture leave no doubt that black women's demands have left little time for healing. Yet, these poets recognize that justice, survival, and healing (which is to say, beauty as truth, in a way that Keats would probably support) are part of their work. Their poems give black women names that need to be spoken and read: powerful, magical, regal, multidimensional, enraged, conflicted, mistreated. By calling out their bodies away from shame and their experiences out of silence with these names, they enable black women's freeing of self that Morrison refers to in opening epigraph from *Beloved*. Naming is freeing oneself, taking oneself back; once it occurs they can act in ownership by renaming: self-accepting, self-defining, self-loving, and self-possessed. This is the agency Morrison refers to, the finish to what started on the auction block.

Notes

[i] Lorde, Audre, *"Poetry is Not A Luxury." Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984. *37.*

[ii] Williams, Sherley Anne, "Some Implications of Womanist Theory." Napier, 218-223.

[iii] Examples include Alicia Ostriker's "Kin and Kin:The Poetry of Lucille Clifton", Hilary Holladay's "Black Names in White Space: Lucille Clifton's South", and Cheryl A. Wall's "Sifting Legacies in Lucille Clifton's 'Generations'".

[iv] I refer to two 1988 essays, Houston Baker's "Our Lady: Sonia Sanchez and the Writing of a Black Renaissance", and James Robert Saunders' analytical work, which locates a correspondence between *Homegirls and Handgrenades* and Toomer's *Cane*. These are followed by Regina Jennings' 1992 dissertation "The Blue/Black Poetics of Sonia Sanchez".

[v] From the Sanchez poem, "I Have Walked A Long Time," *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon, 1999. 47.

[vi] ibid.

[vii] I am thinking of Chestnutt's work in general and in particular, the short story, "The Wife of His Youth" (1899) and the novel, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and *Maude Martha* (1953*)* by Gwendolyn Brooks, are among the prime examples of this issue within canonical African-American literature.

[viii] op.cit. Sanchez, *SL* 47.

[ix] From the Sanchez poem, "To All Brothers: From All Sisters." *Homegirls and Handgrenades*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984. 26.

[x] Examples of Sexton poems include "Menstruation at Forty", "Consorting with Angels," "Self in 1958," "Her Kind," "Housewife", and "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife". Examples of Plath poems include "The Disquieting Muses," "Wintering," "Metaphors," "Edge," and "Lady Lazarus."

[xi] Booker discusses Wellek and Warren as disseminators of the New Critical tradition who distinguish and elevate "the special operations of literary language" over that of the 'scientific' and the 'everyday' language" and are "dismissive of social and political approaches to lit, arguing that these…fail to take into account the relative independence of art from its social context" (18-19).

[xii] From the Clifton poem, "i was born with twelve fingers." *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir 1969-1980*. Rochester: BOA, 1987. 166.

[xiii] Rememory is Morrison's idea of a tangible and unchanging experience that outlasts its physical evidence, which Sethe describes to Denver in *Beloved* page 36.

[xiv] op. cit. Clifton *GW* 166.

[xv] I am alluding, particularly and with gratitude, to the following works: Edward Whitley's "A Long Missing Part of Itself: Bringing Lucille Clifton's *Generations* Into American Literature," *MELUS* Vol. 6, No. 2, Identities (Summer 2001), 47-64; Cheryl A. Wall's "Sifting Legacies in Lucille Clifton's "Generations," *Contemporary Literature,* Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter, 1999), 552-574; and Alicia Ostriker's "Kin and Kin: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton," *American Poetry Review,* Vol. 22, No. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1993), 41-49.

[xvi] From the untitled Clifton poem that begins "won't you celebrate with me." *The Book of Light*. Copper Canyon, Port Chester, 1993. 25.

[xvii] I refer to Clarke, Cheryl. *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005, and also Phillip Brian Harper, "Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s," pp. 165-188 and Wahneema Lubiano, "Standing In for the State: Black Nationalism and 'Writing' the Black Subject," pp. 156-164, both published in *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism,* Ed. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002).

[xix] *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987. 95.

[xx] Cave Canem is a national nonprofit organization created to provide forums, readings, publishing opportunities and support for African-American poets. It was founded in 1995 by poets Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady.

[xxi] Thomas credits Sanchez's role in the founding of Black Studies on pages 211 and 230 in *Extraordinary Measures: Afro-Centric Modernism and Twentieth Century American Poetry*.

[xxii] Here I am thinking of the women's auxiliary of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and Negro Women's club movement. Despite a certain overarching elitism and philosophical link to the Cult of True Womanhood in these groups and others, these movements also reveal more radical and vocal elements, personified by Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Fannie Barrier Williams. Deborah Gray-White writes cogently about this political diversity in has written about this in *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*.

[xxiii] I am referring here to "The Black Arts Movement" essay cited elsewhere in the study and also to "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation", an essay published in the August, 1968 issue of *Ebony* magazine.

[xxiv] This subtitle borrows the phrase "furious flower" from "The Second Sermon on the Warpland" by Gwendolyn Brooks, section 4, lines 1-2: "The time/ cracks into furious flower. And lifts its face/all unashamed." (*Blacks* 456).

[xxv] Houston Baker links the FBI's 1971 Counterintelligence Program with a "wave of repression" that included "strategic arrests of some black spokesmen and the wanton murder of others" in "The Florescence of Nationalism in the Sixties and Seventies" (129).

[xxvi] Lorenzo Thomas's Chapter 7 in *Extraordinary Measures: Afro-Centric Modernism and Twentieth Century American Poetry,* Fahamisha Patricia Brown's Chapter 6 in *Performing the Word: African-American Poetry as Vernacular Culture*, and Sanchez's interview by Sascha Feinstein in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez* speak to the critical role of orality as fundamental to the BAM's approach to poetry.

[xxvii] I refer to his criteria for culture, quoted in Larry Neal's essay, "The Black Arts Movement," which appears on page 68 in *Visions of A Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings,* Ed. Michael Schultz.

[xxviii] Deborah Gray-White (pp. 39-47) and Paula Giddings (pp. 98-100, 109) indicate that black clubwomen's racial consciousness directed their ideology toward greater political and social activism and independence for black women than the Cult of True Womanhood condoned. Although home was viewed by the clubwomen as the moral center, according to these authors, and thus a power base for women, there were variations, from conservative to liberal, and even struggle around the degree of adherence to subservience to men and traditional male roles that black women should adopt.

[xxix] Other love poems written by women in the BAM period, which I do not intend to suggest that Sanchez's writing prompted, appear in Dudley Randall's 1971 *The Black Poets* anthology. They include "Marrow of My Bone" by Mari Evans (187), "Yuh Lookin GOOD" and "Now Ain't That Love" by Carolyn Rodgers (266, 260), "Beautiful Black Men" by Nikki Giovanni (320), and "Quest" by Naomi Long Madgett (194).

[xxx] Neal, "The Black Writer's Role II: Ellison's Zoot Suit." Schultz 52.

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